



MOVIES

Intense? Sure, but Adam Driver also allows vulnerability into his 'Marriage Story' role



Adam Driver says his time spent in the Marines was good training for life as an actor. "Some of the best acting training I got was going into the military. You learn the benefits of discipline; you're forced to be intimate with strangers in a short period of time. That is exactly acting." (Michael Nagle/For The Times)

By RANDEE DAWN

DEC. 31, 2019
6 AM



New York — When Adam Driver and Noah Baumbach decide to brainstorm a new project, they've got it down to a routine. The longtime friends gather at a restaurant and just start ... talking.

“The conversation turns to work, things we’ve seen, things we want to make, structural ideas,” says Driver, who has now appeared in four Baumbach-directed productions, including the [new “Marriage Story.”](#) In it, he plays Charlie, a New York City theater director whose marriage has crumbled. The role has already earned Golden Globe and SAG nominations — and few will be surprised if/when he lands his second Academy Award nomination for it.

Anyway, that’s how it starts when Driver and Baumbach put their heads together. “Then it changes location, and suddenly we’re in a rehearsal room, and then we are on set, and then it’s over,” Driver continues. He’s sitting in a New York City hotel room a few days after Thanksgiving, dressed head to toe in black, the neckline of his sweater starting to fray. His back is to the wide bay window, so it’ll take a few moments before he realizes it’s snowing.

“And then — ” yes, there’s more — “we still come and talk about it,” he says. “Even when it’s all over, we talk about it, and then we move on to ‘OK, what do you want to do next?’ That’s the cycle.”

If every award season has a man of the moment, this year is Adam Driver’s turn on the wheel. In the decade since he graduated from Juilliard — having been rejected from the school once before, joining the Marines, getting medically discharged, then coming home to successfully matriculate — the versatile, striking, hyper-focused actor has dazzled in virtually every project he’s taken on.

Adam is the kind of actor where if there’s a light flickering, or a string on his wardrobe — he’ll use it in the scene.

WRITER-DIRECTOR SCOTT Z. BURNS

Most audiences met Driver as part of HBO’s “Girls” ensemble, but his reputation has grown with star turns in “Paterson,” “Silence” and “BlacKkKlansman.” Early in 2019 he pulled in nominations for a Tony (“Burn This”) and an Oscar (“BlacKkKlansman”); he’ll close out the year starring in three wildly different genres of films: “The Report,” “Marriage Story” and “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker,” in which he plays Darth Vader’s grandson.

Now, *that’s* a cycle.

The fact is directors love Driver. “Adam is the kind of actor where if there’s a light flickering, or a string on his wardrobe — he’ll use it in the scene,” says “Report” writer-director Scott Z. Burns. “He’s not just someone who memorizes his lines — he understands them. He shows up and knows the scene, and when you do that, you have the opportunity to play.”

To Baumbach, Driver is nothing less than inspirational. (Hence those dinners.) “Somebody said about poetry that it delivers your own thoughts back to you with added majesty,” says the director. “I think Adam does that as a performer with the characters and dialogue I write. He’s playful. You feel his excitement at being there.”

Such enthusiasm and willingness to explore tends to translate as deep intensity on screen, a description Driver says he hears a lot. “I don’t feel I’m intense as a person, though,” he says. “I just don’t take for granted that we’re making a movie — a document that’s going to last forever. Why not try to make sure that what we’re working on is worth the effort?”



MOVIES

Review: Adam Driver and Scarlett Johansson will break your heart in the masterful ‘Marriage Story’

Nov. 5, 2019

The fact that moviemaking is a communal effort seems to ring the right bells for Driver. When he was 7 — about the age of son Henry in “Marriage Story” — Driver’s parents split, and his mother relocated the family to Indiana from California. She married a Baptist minister, and Driver sang in the church choir.

He says he’s not religious now, but adds, “I know what it feels like working on something as a community. Even just the act of singing songs in a group is an incredibly powerful thing. It’s similar to making a movie — when all the pieces are working together, you are one part of a picture.”

That’s a sensation he also achieved while in the Marines — which he also says is not unlike moviemaking. “You have a director, or a squad leader, and sometimes they know what they are doing, and sometimes they don’t,” he says. “When they don’t, what you are doing feels incredibly

useless. When they do, it feels active and relevant and exciting. Some of the best acting training I got was going into the military. You learn the benefits of discipline; you're forced to be intimate with strangers in a short period of time. That is exactly acting."

And if all that translates into intensity, so be it. However his essential appeal may be described, Driver has been making people sit up virtually since he got on stage. Greta Gerwig (with whom Driver appeared in "Frances Ha," another Baumbach film) recalls catching him in his second professional play, "The Retributionists," in 2009.

"I looked at him and thought, 'Holy mackerel, you've got it,'" she says. "I was thinking, 'This kid's gonna be a star,' like I was an old-timey agent. I've never been more unsurprised by someone's ascent."

Yet despite having the full Juilliard complement of classes, Driver says, he picked up his most valuable acting lessons while appearing onstage with Frank Langella in 2011's "Man and Boy." "He's the most ferocious person on stage, and totally fearless," says Driver. "The biggest lesson I took from working with him is not to have a set way of doing something. Never hold on to what is working by thinking there's no other way it can work. Bad writing is 'There is no other option.' With good writing, it opens your imagination."



MOVIES

The importance of Adam Driver singing 'Being Alive' in 'Marriage Story'

Dec. 6, 2019

And if anyone requires an example of what it means to watch Driver inhabit a scene, they need only see what he does with Stephen Sondheim's "Being Alive" toward the end of "Marriage." Driver steers through the entire song, bringing the full weight of his stage, TV, screen and, yes, military experience to the tune — and you can see Charlie transform with the words.

"For me, singing is way more vulnerable than anything else [on camera]," he says. "It's got to be about the character, not the notes. Music always seems to come from an unexpected place — and it's true to life. Like, we don't live in a genre. There's always moments of a song or dance that come from nowhere that I just *love* in film."

So perhaps that's what's so hard to pinpoint about Driver's charisma on camera: that whether he's up there being an investigating Senate staffer; a yearning, divorced dad; or the biggest villain in the galaxy (Kylo Ren killed Han Solo!), Driver is simultaneously being entirely vulnerable. Even when he isn't singing, there's music in his performance.

He also has no plans to end the song any time soon. "I have no goal," he says. "There is no *thing* I want to do, like a role I'm dying to play. I have no game plan, other than to work with great filmmakers."

"Hey." He turns in his seat mid-sentence and stares out the hotel room's bay window. "What's this?" He takes a long beat, watching the first snow of the season fall on his adopted city, grinning. He's been here 14 years and lives with his wife and son in Brooklyn and has no regrets about not grabbing the Hollywood life.

"I've never thought about a need to go to L.A.," he says. "New York is my favorite city in the world. It's where I always wanted to be."



MOVIES

'Marriage Story' star Adam Driver ponders the L.A. vs. NYC debate

Sep. 9, 2019

MOVIES

AWARDS

OSCARs

NEWSLETTER

Get our weekly Indie Focus newsletter

Please enter your email address

Subscribe