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## FILM

## Photographic memories

Bad is best for Pedro Almodóvar;  
Brother to Brother recalls Renaissance

## Bad Education

Pedro Almodóvar is up to his old tricks, but in an inspired new way. The Spanish auteur, who's been a queer icon for decades, follows his relatively somber but increasingly masterful recent work (*All About My Mother*, *Talk to Her*) with the sexy-verging-on-raunchy, irreverent, cinephilia-steeped, quasi-autobiographical *Bad Education*, and it's an unequivocal success.

The new film recalls his late-'80s breakthroughs (the naughty homoeroticism of *Law of Desire* and the vivid, melodramatic desperation of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*), but that

Gael García Bernal has an unforgettably ravishing drag turn in *Bad Education*

newly serene mastery of the medium remains. Almodóvar has always had an eyeball-pleasuring style, but *Bad Education's* confidence and fluidity reach exhilarating levels. The film offers one imaginative composition, stirring camera movement, evocative color scheme and brilliant editing stroke after another, not to mention Gael García Bernal (the rising Mexican star of *Y Tu Mamá También* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*) looking several different kinds of gorgeous.

The story concerns the intermittently converging lives of two men who, during their beleaguered, repressed Catholic schoolboy days, were each other's first loves. An unexpected meeting decades later, after one of the boys (Fele Martínez) has become a famous filmmaker and the other (Bernal) a floundering writer/actor, provokes a barrage of memories we're made privy to via progressively revelatory flashbacks, with the tragic erosion of the boys' connection at the hands of church, family, time and ambition the recurring theme.

Almodóvar brings an exquisite relish to the storytelling. A film within the film involves a Hitchcockian case of mistaken identity (like a gender-reversed *Vertigo*), the unfolding of a surprise film noir murder mystery and the first stirrings of youthful sexuality finding mutual release at the cinema. And those are just the most memorable bits; this is a movie in which literally every scene gives us something new, narratively or visually, to enjoy.

With its unhurried, unabashedly graphic and lustily idealized sex (all gay), *Bad Education* earns its NC-17 rating, but, as in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, the same-sex softcore scenes are simultaneously a yummy turn-on and indispensable. They're only the most explicit manifestation of a nostalgic yearning, a libidinal tenderness that permeates and provides the heart of the entire film.

*Bad Education* is a career best for Almodóvar, a truly great film and priority viewing for all dedicated filmgoers. A seductive, highly satisfying, transporting cinematic experience awaits you.

—Christopher McQuinn

## Brother to Brother

*Brother to Brother* opens with the lead character on a subway. This setting isn't accidental; Perry Williams is a young man in transit—emotionally, artistically, sexually. A budding artist who's also black and gay, he doesn't seem to fit in anywhere. His parents throw him out when they catch him kissing another guy. He's dished (and later bashed) by fellow students of a black history class when he brings up James Baldwin's homosexuality. His quasi-boyfriend seems more straight than gay

and insults him by talking about his "sweet black ass." And he's so wound up that he can't respond even to a gallery owner who seems genuinely interested in his art. Lo, a guardian angel appears—and no ordinary one. An old man who seems like just another anonymous street person turns out to be Bruce Nugent, one of the

Daniel Sunjata (Tony Award nominee for *Take Me Out*) and Aunjanue Ellis (Image Award nominee for *Men of Honor*) star as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston in *Brother to Brother*

Harlem Renaissance's major figures, now broke and forgotten. Despite the gap in their ages and their different stations in life, each has something special to offer the other. Perry reminds Nugent of his own vibrant and troubled past as a gay artist, and Nugent conjures up for Perry the classic world of Langston Hughes, Walter Thurman,

Zora Neale Hurston and other luminaries of that rich period of the 1920s and '30s. Nugent's vivid stories—shown in extended black-and-white sequences—entrance and inspire his young friend.

The actors excel in this beautifully shot drama. Anthony Mackie is especially effective as the rock-solid center, masterfully withholding his emotions until just the right moment. (This makes up for his appearance Spike Lee's appalling *She Hate Me*.) And Roger Robinson is wonderfully authentic as the mysterious, playful Nugent, who starts as a ghostly presence in the background of Perry's struggle and develops into a life-changing friend.

Writer/director Rodney Evans spent six years working on this script, inspired by the real Nugent, who died in obscurity in 1987. The film seamlessly shifts between his past and Perry's present without losing the drama or the characters.

While some viewers may find the pacing too leisurely, this is one drama about activism and artistic struggle that can't be accused of preachiness. Nugent captures the charms of the film in a beautifully rendered toast to a friend: "Here's to lost beauty. May it always be nearby with the potential to keep you warm."

—Gary Morris