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FILM

The Almodóvar touch

Northwest Film Center looks at career of gay Spanish director

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

In old Hollywood, the stylistic qualities that seamlessly brought together elegance, political awareness, comedy, romance and drama in the films of director Ernst Lubitsch (*The Shop Around the Corner*, *Heaven Can Wait*) were called, simply, "the Lubitsch touch."

The works comprising *The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, a near-complete retrospective of the gay Spanish director's career at the Northwest Film Center, amply demonstrate that there is an "Almodóvar touch" as indispensable to contemporary cinema as Lubitsch's was to classical Hollywood. It is this inimitable touch—an excessive yet skillful devotion to color, artifice, pop culture debris and outrageous emotion and sexuality, all veering recklessly from full-on camp to the most glorious heights of comedy

its charm; these are, after all, the tackiest, most low-budget sisters imaginable.

That film's delirious, surrealistic satire recurs through much of Almodóvar's subsequent work. Less slight and more polished is 1984's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, set in a Madrid public housing block, where a No-Doz-addicted housewife (Almodóvar regular Carmen Maura) copes with her loutish husband, friendly prostitute neighbor, mercenary mother-in-law and two wayward sons.

Also in this predominantly satirical vein are 1988's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*—

var's quietest and most restrained film up to that point, gives Paredes a beautiful star turn as an aspiring serious novelist making her living writing pulp romances under a pseudonym as she awaits her negligent husband's return from a peacekeeping mission in Sarajevo.

1999's epic, elegiac *All About My Mother*—the title is a play on *All About Eve*—is the tender story of a woman (Cecilia Roth) who loses her son and, with the help of a great

stage actress (Paredes again), a transsexual prostitute and a pregnant nun, tries to rediscover her place in life. One of the director's best, and winner of an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, it's the perfect introduction for the Almodóvar neophyte; David Thomson called it "one of those films to make you wonder if God didn't mean the movies to be gay."

On that subject, it's surprising how very queer all of Almodóvar's films seem considering how few of them are, strictly speaking, "gay movies." Both 1987's *Law of Desire* and *Bad Education* do unabashedly depict the fully sexualized loves and lusts of gay men, but clearly, to

Almodóvar, falling in love is a sensuous, erotic experience no matter one's gender or orientation. He has an abiding affection for those who break the gender barrier: *Law of Desire* features a transsexual (Almodóvar regular Bibí Ander-

sen) cast as a straight woman opposite a woman (Maura) cast as a transsexual, while *Bad Education* is framed by a transsexual's story. Transvestites, drag queens, hookers, sexually assertive women and other marginalized characters create such a lively, captivating background in Almodóvar's films that any characters retaining their original gender identity, regardless of their orientation, seem straightforward to the point of conventionality.

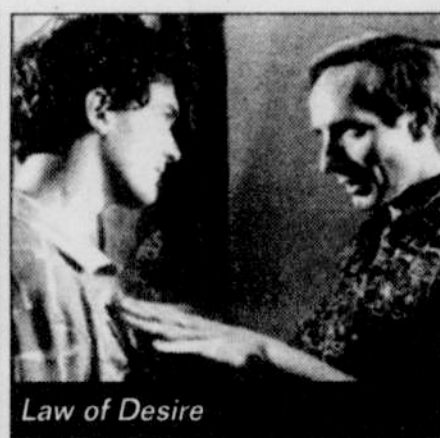
The odd film out in the retrospective is 1997's *Live Flesh*, a Ruth Rendell adaptation done nicely enough as a sexed-up revenge thriller but lacking the other films' unmistakably Almodóvarian qualities; 1986's *Matador*, missing from the roster, would've been a more felicitous selection. Otherwise, the only thing about the program that seems off is the random sequencing of the screenings, which is neither chronological nor with any evident theme or categorization. But that's not really a problem: This polymorphous filmmaker would undoubtedly appreciate a schedule illustrating that, for his sexy, funny, witty and touching body of work, one point of entry is as good as another. **JM**

The Northwest Film Center screens THE FILMS OF PEDRO ALMODOVAR through May 21. For a complete schedule visit www.nwfilm.org.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN lives, writes and works in Seattle. He finds that Antonio Banderas' post-Almodóvar career can cause anxiety and depression.



Live Flesh



Law of Desire



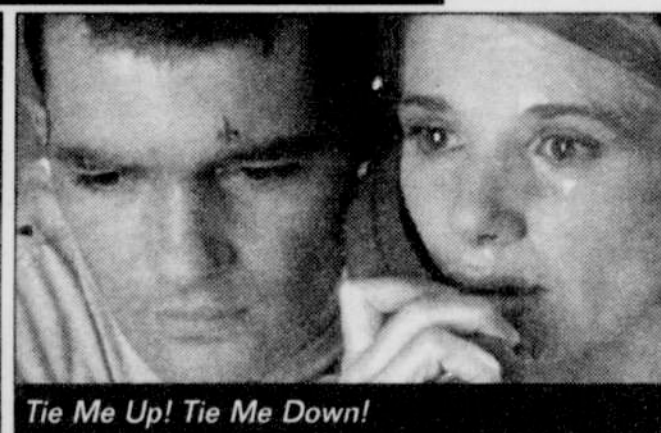
Dark Habits



All About My Mother



Pedro Almodóvar



Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!

Almodóvar's breakthrough hit featuring Maura, Banderas and

most of the regular Almodóvar troupe running around in a postfeminist screwball about being driven mad by inscrutable men—and the 1990 romantic comedy *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, in which Banderas plays a just-released mental patient who kidnaps and falls in love with an ex-porn star turned B-movie actress (Victoria Abril).

This strain of Almodóvar's work reaches its pinnacle in 1993's *Kika*, in which a naive, ditzzy Lucille Ball-like cosmetologist (Verónica Forqué) finds herself caught in the middle of a murder mystery involving her husband, her maid, an escaped rapist, an American writer and a sensational TV newswoman. The film's extremely politically incorrect slapstick centerpiece (you'll be shocked, either in the good way or in the dismayed way) makes it Almodóvar's most provocative, and possibly funniest, film.

All Almodóvar has its moments of outlandish humor, but his later films evolve toward a kind of florid, less frenetic—even contemplative and tear-jerking—Douglas Sirk-like "women's picture." In 1991's *High Heels*—an explicit homage to Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*—a famous actress (regal Almodóvar fixture Marisa Paredes) is forgiven by her daughter (Abril) for a life lived in her shadow after the mother makes a tremendous sacrifice to absolve her daughter of murdering a man they both loved. 1995's *The Flower of My Secret*, Almodó-

and melodrama—that made 2004's *Bad Education*, a fantastically stylish, homoerotic film noir with blatantly autobiographical elements, the best film of the year and his greatest film to date.

Almodóvar began his career doing a bit of everything—rock music, comics, 8 mm short films—in Madrid's underground culture of the early to mid-1970s, during the waning reign of Francisco Franco. The president's authoritarian, generally censorious administration did much to hinder Spanish artistic expression, and a satirical, flamboyantly gay sensibility like Almodóvar's was not looked upon kindly.

Almodóvar's gifts flourished after Franco's death in 1977, however, and he is now easily the most well-known and highly acclaimed Spanish or gay filmmaker in the world. A true auteur, he has time and again brought a world of his own vibrant invention to the silver screen and developed special, ongoing relationships with actors, many of them unknowns who later developed into huge stars: Penélope Cruz (who is already cast in his next three films), Antonio Banderas and Javier Bardem all have him to thank for their fame.

The earliest Almodóvar film on the program is his fourth feature, 1983's *Dark Habits*. Early Almodóvar is often likened to the shock value of early John Waters, and *Dark Habits*—with its order of heroin-shooting, blackmailing lesbian nuns out to save their convent by any means necessary—validates that comparison. The low-budget tackiness of the film is part of