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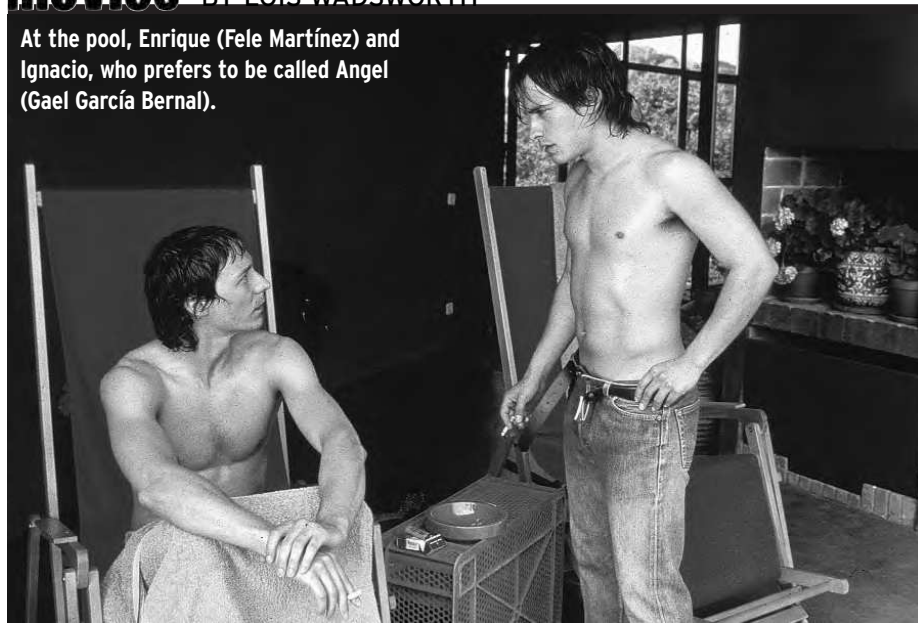
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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH

At the pool, Enrique (Fele Martínez) and Ignacio, who prefers to be called Angel (Gael García Bernal).



DIEGO LOPEZ CALVIN/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS, 2004.

Double Trouble

Almodóvar's new film noir.

BAD EDUCATION: Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Produced by Agustín Almodóvar. Cinematography, José Luis Alcaine. Edited by José Salcedo. Music, Alberto Iglesias. Art director, Antón Gómez. Starring Gael García Bernal and Fele Martínez, with Javier Cámara, Daniel Giménez-Cacho, Lluís Homar, Francisco Boira, Francisco Maestre, Juan Fernández, Ignacio Pérez, Raúl García Forneiro, Alberto Ferreiro and Petra Martínez. Sony Pictures Classics, 2004. 110 minutes. NR.

Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar consistently creates interesting, layered, character-driven, richly cinematic works that require the audience to participate in uncovering the film's meaning. He is a master storyteller, satisfying my need for complexity while not abandoning narrative structure.

Almodóvar works on an emotional level that resonates. He forgives his characters their bad behavior but gives each room to express a range of feelings. He incorporates fantasy elements into realistic stories, such as last year's stunning *Talk to Her*, which I feel sure I saw way more times than you did. Already I know twice is not enough to fully understand *Bad Education*. So if you like being spoon-fed, skip this movie. Otherwise, plan to see it at least a couple of times.

One of the most challenging aspects of the film is time. It opens in 1980, in Madrid, at the home of a film director, Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez). A man who claims to be an old school friend from childhood, Ignacio Rodriguez (Gael García Bernal), interrupts Enrique's work. Enrique doesn't recognize Ignacio, who says he is now an actor using the stage name of Angel Andrade. Identity joins time in flexibility.

Enrique is looking for material for his next film, and he is touched when Angel offers him a story called "The Visit." The film moves back in time to 1964, when Enrique (Raúl García Forneiro) first met and fell in love with Ignacio (Francisco Boira). The situation was charged, because the boarding school principal, Father Manolo (Daniel Giménez-Cacho), was helplessly in love with one boy and had the other expelled.

But reading Ignacio/Angel's story, Enrique begins to see it as a movie script. Now the film slides deeper into the movie-within-the-movie, and identities go through further transformations. As an adult, Ignacio has become a transvestite prostitute and cabaret performer named Zahara (Gael García Bernal). In the script, Zahara goes to the old school, where Fr. Manolo still holds

mass, with her lover and criminal partner, Paquito (Javier Cámara, Benigno in *Talk to Her*).

As the story deepens, and the movie is being filmed, still more identities melt and run together, such as Juan (Gael García Bernal), Mr. Berenguer (Lluís Homar), junkie drag queen (Francisco Boira), and Ignacio's mother (Petra Martínez). It takes a couple of viewings just to begin seeing how all the various personae interact. Are they all characters from the mind of the filmmaker? Which filmmaker: Enrique Goded or Pedro Almodóvar?

Of course, Almodóvar has been asked countless times about whether the film is autobiographical. He says no, these things did not happen to him. But yes, as a youth he did attend a Catholic boarding school, where he heard similar stories from friends. One aspect of Enrique's character that seems to come from Almodóvar's actual life was his discovery at age 10 of the word "hedonist," which he decided fit him perfectly. But Almodóvar steadfastly denies targeting the church.

"'Bad Education' is not a settling of scores with the priests who 'bad-educated' me or with the clergy in general," Almodóvar writes in the production notes. "If I had needed to take revenge I wouldn't have waited 40 years to do so. The church doesn't interest me, not even as an adversary."

An Almodóvar film wouldn't be complete without homage to films that opened the world to an imaginative boy who grew up in a small Spanish village during Franco's long stranglehold on cultural life and cinema. We see three movie posters on a wall, but I can identify only the first: *Double Indemnity*, an influential film noir from 1944 directed by Billy Wilder. Late in *Bad Education*, two characters sit through a double bill, which the production notes identify as Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* and Marcel Carné's *Thérèse Raquin*. Almodóvar deconstructs the noir genre in his own brilliant manner. This one is a jewel.

Explicit sex may be problematic for some viewers, but try to get past it. *Bad Education* isn't about sex; it's about stories and how we can't live without them. A great film by my favorite filmmaker, *Bad Education* opens at the Bijou on Friday, Feb. 17, with the very highest recommendations. **EW**



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