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This warped saga is only skin deep

CANNES

By JUSTIN CHANG

Pedro Almodovar has spent a career finding the pleasure in perversity, a talent that works both for and against "The Skin I Live In." The creepily convoluted tale of a plastic surgeon and his beautiful captive patient, Thierry Jonquet's novel "Mygale" turns out to be a neatly accommodating vessel for the Spanish auteur's pet themes and stylistic proclivities, and after the underwhelming "Broken Embraces," this Antonio Banderas starrer demonstrates enough signs of renewed vigor to ensure robust specialized returns. But despite its scalpel-like precision, pic falls short of its titular promise,

never quite getting under the skin as it should.

Due to be released Stateside in November by Sony Classics, the film will open Sept. 2 in Spain, marking the first time Cannes vet Almodovar has premiered a film at the festival in advance of its local release. Decision to unveil "Skin" early admittedly

runs the risk of leaking a crucial twist in this warped saga of rape, revenge, mental illness and superfluous surgery. Yet foreknowledge of what happens should, if anything, make the prospect of Almodovar's film that much more enticing for his fans, who are sure to embrace his signature Hitchcockian

flourishes, byzantine plotting and mercurial view of sexual identity and desire.

A Toledo-based plastic surgeon working to devise a revolutionary human skin treatment,

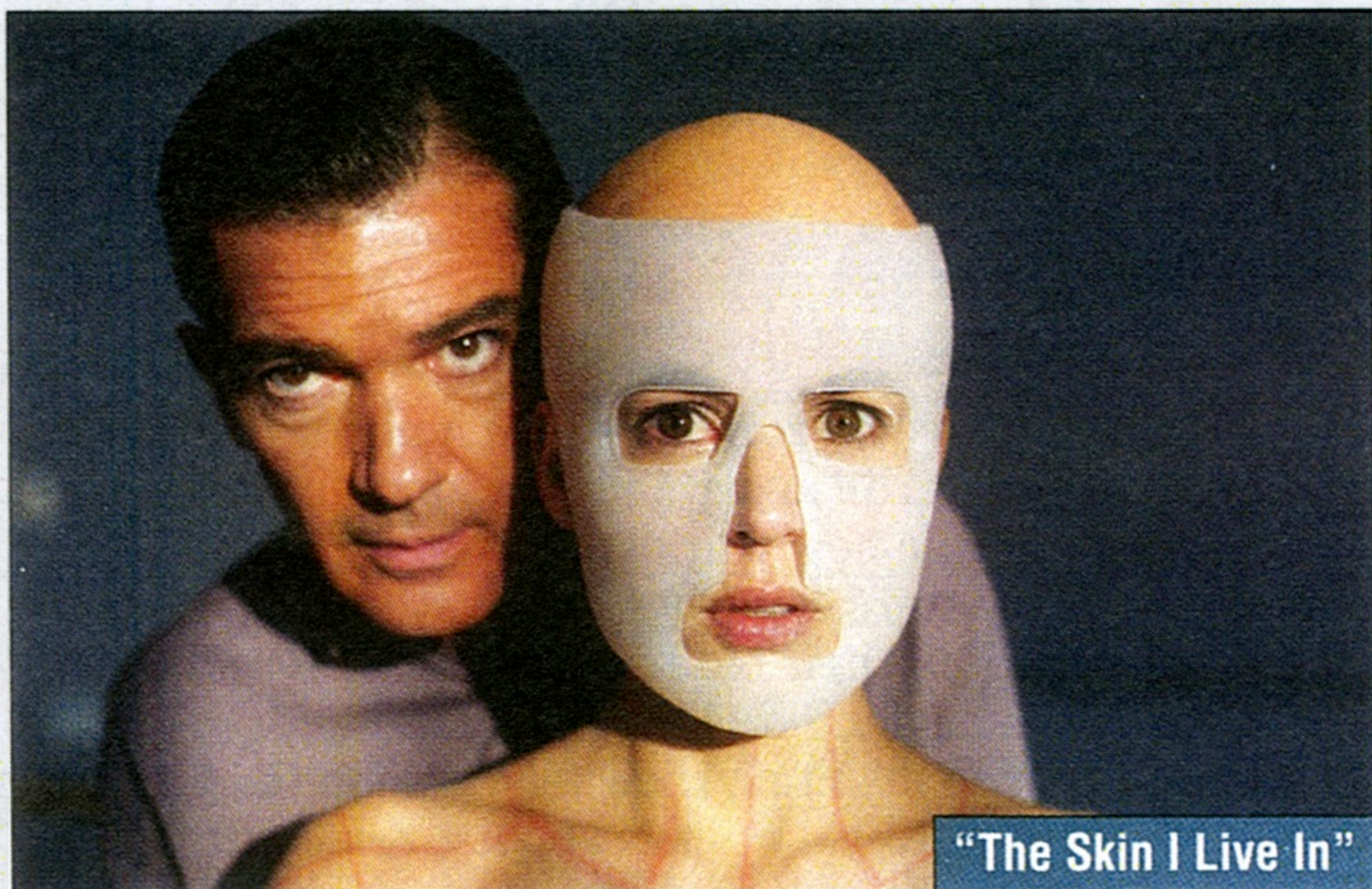
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THE SKIN I LIVE IN

Sony

Directed by
Pedro Almodovar

Starring:
Antonio Banderas,
Elena Anaya,
Marisa Paredes



"The Skin I Live In"

THE SKIN I LIVE IN

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Dr. Robert Ledgard (Banderas) lives, like most Almodovar characters, in a house distinguished by richly colored interiors and impeccable furnishings (courtesy of art director Antxon Gomez). His manse, however, has the added bonus of an operating theater and a beautiful woman locked away in an upstairs bedroom.

Kept under continual surveillance by Robert and his housekeeper, Marilia (Marisa Paredes), Vera (Elena Anaya) dwells in luxurious isolation. When she's not attempting suicide, she's trying to seduce Robert, a proposition the doctor entertains with a telling mixture of temptation and repulsion. Most of the time she's forced to wear a flesh-toned unitard that turns her body into a literal and figurative blank, allowing Robert — and by extension, the viewer — to project whatever fantasies they want onto her frequently supine figure.

An intrusion by an outsider initiates a turning point in Robert and Vera's none-too-healthy dynamic. It also kicks off the first of numerous flashbacks involving Robert's daughter (Blanca Suarez) and Vicente (Jan Cornet), a young man she met at a fateful party, establishing the devious circumstances under which Vera fell under the doctor's care.

Much as he did with Ruth Rendell's "Live Flesh," Almodovar has taken an ice-cold psychological thriller, penned by a novelist of far less humanistic temperament, and performed some stylistic surgery of his own, adding broad comic relief, overripe melodrama, outrageous asides and zesty girl-power uplift. The big reveal, when it arrives, is pure catnip for the helmer, enabling another of his madcap paeans to the supremacy of women and the fluidity of relational boundaries, and decisively positioning Vera, not Robert, as the true protagonist of this twisted tale.

Indeed, one can't quite shake the feeling that the director, having found an ideal vehicle for his sensibility, was unwilling to return the favor by fully embracing the inherent darkness of the material. Revelations that induced shudders of terror on the page have been soft-



"The Skin I Live In"

ened or excised altogether, and the many surgical scenes, though meticulously prepared and beautifully shot by d.p. Jose Luis Alcaine, have none of the lingering clinical horror of, say, Georges Franju's classic "Eyes Without a Face." This gentler approach might have worked had the film delivered a compensatory rush of feeling, but "The Skin I Live In" gives short shrift to some of the story's most emotionally rich passages, particularly the long period in which Robert and his patient cement their unlikely bond.

Strong cast consists largely of Almodovar vets, led by Banderas (reteaming with the director for the first time in the 21 years since "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!"), who makes Robert a fascinatingly seductive figure even as one recoils from the sick ends to which he takes his special gifts. Anaya ("Talk to Her") has to do little more than bask in the camera's appreciative gaze, which she holds effortlessly. Elsewhere, Paredes delivers a sharp turn as the domestic whose tart wisdom goes unheeded, while Cornet registers sympathetically as a young man unwittingly caught up in horrors beyond his control.

Alberto Iglesias' arresting score, marked by cacophonous violins and frenzied, weblike repetitions, musically conjures the spider-and-fly metaphor more explicitly detailed in Jonquet's novel.

A Sony Pictures Classics (in North America)/Warner Sogefilms (in Spain) release of an El Deseo presentation. Produced by Agustin Almodovar, Esther Garcia.

Directed by Pedro Almodovar. Screenplay, Pedro Almodovar, with the collaboration of Agustin Almodovar, based on the novel "Mygale" by Thierry Jonquet. Camera (color); Jose Luis Alcaine; editor, Jose Salcedo; music, Alberto Iglesias; art director, Antxon Gomez; sound (Dolby Digital), Ivan Marin, Marc Orts; associate producer, Barbara Peiro; casting, Luis San Narciso. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 19, 2011.** Running time: **120 MIN.**

With: Antonio Banderas, Elena Anaya, Marisa Paredes, Jan Cornet, Roberto Alamo, Eduard Fernandez, Blanca Suarez, Susi Sanchez, Barbara Lennie, Fernando Cayo, Jose Luis Gomez.