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# Almodovar: New man of La Mancha

**N**EW YORK — In the films of Pedro Almodovar, the characters stage a militant fight for pleasure.

"When we speak of fighting for pleasure," says the Spanish film director, "of course we mean sexuality. But beyond that, more important, is your own individuality. In all my films, whether you are a housewife or a policeman, you have autonomy. You do what you do with a strict, private morality. An untraditional morality."

Untraditional, indeed.

In the first scene of Almodovar's "What Have I Done to Deserve This," a Madrid cleaning woman, mopping the floor of a karate school, has a passionate encounter with a stranger in the school's shower. Later, she sells her 12-year-old son, who seems to like sex, to a homosexual dentist. Then she murders her oppressive husband by beheading him

bullfighting teacher, and Maria, a criminal lawyer. For both of them, murder is an integral element of sexual pleasure.

In "Law of Desire," Tina, a transsexual actress (played by Carmen Maura, a Madrid comedienne who stars in many of Almodovar's films) is cast in a play by Pablo, her brother, a director who is having an affair with a young man who will stop at nothing —



Pedro Almodovar: "Prudence is not an element of romanticism."

Photo by TONY PALMIERI

with a hambone, which she subsequently cooks for supper.

When the film was shown in the 1985 New Directors/New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art here, critics described it with words such as "brilliant," "wonderful" and "masterpiece."

Two other films by Almodovar will be shown in the coming weeks. "Law of Desire," which is closing this year's New Directors series this weekend, opens Sunday at the Cinema Studio. "Matador" doesn't yet have a distributor, but will be shown April 1 and April 8 at the Guild 50th Street as part of the Third Festival of Films From Spain in New York. If the advance reviews are any indication, these films should consolidate Almodovar's place as one of the most original voices to emerge from Europe in a generation.

Besides the fight for pleasure, Almodovar's films are marked by farcical plot turns, broad black humor, passionate melodrama, madness and murder. Danger always lurks over the shoulder of pleasure, and sex and death are sometimes as close as two lips. "Matador" is a romance between Diego, a

you dream of. But the idea in my films is, if you do, it's a miracle. You may have to pay an absolute price. It's important to be ready for that — and pay an absolute price. It's important to be ready for that — and pay it. Not paying the price is the opposite of living."

Almodovar was born in 1949. When he was 10, he wrote an essay about the immaculate conception in school. "I don't really remember it," he says with a smile. "I only remember I won a prize for it, and my career as a writer started then." After growing up in La Mancha, he moved to Madrid and worked in the post office for 10 years.

His apprenticeship was served writing comic books and underground magazines. In the Seventies, he worked with an experimental theater group called Los Galiardos and made scores of films in Super 8. His first professional feature, "Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom," was made in 1980.

Almodovar thinks the wildness of his films reflects the cultural revolution and the growth of personal freedom in Spain after Franco's death in 1975. "After he died, we lived. Spain is more open. The mentality changed. People are not afraid. We create with much more freedom, without censorship."

In "Law of Desire," the characters are motivated only by their gratification. Many of them drink, snort cocaine, pop pills and are sexually active.

Almodovar points out that it is a very romantic story.

"Prudence is not an element of romanticism," he says. "There is night, there are a lot of thunderstorms, there are bathrooms. But prudence belongs to another genre."

The sexually specific nature of the film is bound to raise eyebrows, particularly in the age of AIDS.

"Of course I think AIDS is a big danger," says Almodovar, "but sometimes I think it's good to think about love and sex without thinking about these things. I don't feel an obligation to make films that are strictly linked with reality."

"More dangerous than AIDS is intolerance and this wave of 'morality' that has appeared everywhere. Society takes advantage of the illness to impose a very conservative behavior on people. That's very dangerous."

"We have to be very careful about this. Now I feel more radical than ever before, although it is not the fashion to be radical. We have to defend ourselves against society. Private freedom, freedom of expression is so important. You have to take the responsibility for your own freedom. We have to be very wild now."

— DAVID LIDA



Carmen Maura: Robust and riveting

## 'Law of Desire'

**I**n "Law of Desire," a wickedly funny melodrama that opens Sunday at the Cinema Studio, a young man, Antonio (Antonio Banderas), has what he claims is his first homosexual encounter with Pablo (Eusebio Poncela), a director. Antonio falls instantly in love, but Pablo's passion is for another man. He tells Antonio that theirs was a frivolous affair that meant nothing.

Antonio refuses to take no for an answer. "You're in love with me, I know," he says.

Like all the characters in the film, Antonio obeys one law — the law of his passions. A policeman searching a man's apartment finds some cocaine, and since it's too small an amount for a major arrest, snorts it. Pablo's sister, Tina, an actress who has undergone a transsexual operation, asks a man to hose her down in the street just because she is hot. Tina is apt to argue with Pablo about a script he's writing for her before she's even read it. When Pablo receives a letter from his lover that he doesn't like, he rewrites the letter and asks the lover to sign it and send it back.

The film is painted with broad strokes. Filled with bright colors and fluid camerawork, the story is violent, extreme and sexually graphic. "Law of Desire," written and directed by Pedro Almodovar, seductively sweeps us into its characters' passions in a milieu of Madrid discotheques, theater dressing rooms, sweaty bedrooms.

Poncela is both selfish and sympathetic as Pablo and Banderas is chillingly single-minded as Antonio. As Tina, Carmen Maura, with huge brown eyes, a generous, sensuous smile and a quick temper, gives a robust and riveting performance that calls to mind some of the women played by Sophia Loren and Anna Magnani.

In an era when many films are made strictly with an eye for box-office returns, Almodovar, with his explorations of love, passion and sexual identity — sometimes tragic, usually farcical — is proving himself to be one of film's rabble-rousing pathfinders.

—D.L.