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## TALK TO HER

(HABLE CON ELLA)

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(SPAIN)

A Warner Sogefilms (in Spain)/Sony Pictures Classics (in U.S.) release of an El Deseo production, in association with Antena 3, Via Digital. (International sales: Good Machine Intl., N.Y.) Executive producer, Agustin Almodovar.

Directed, written by Pedro Almodovar. Camera (color, widescreen), Javier Aguirresarobe; editor, Jose Salcedo; music, Alberto Iglesias; art director, Antxon Gomez; sound (Dolby Digital), Miguel Rejas; choreography, Pina Bausch. Reviewed at Cines Princesa, Madrid, March 18, 2002. Running time: 112 MIN.

Benigno ..... Javier Camara  
Marco ..... Dario Grandinetti  
Lydia ..... Rosario Flores  
Alicia ..... Leonor Watling  
Katerina ..... Geraldine Chaplin  
Nurse ..... Mariola Fuentes

With: Roberto Alvarez, Elena Anaya, Lola Duenas, Adolfo Fernandez, Ana Fernandez, Chus Lampreave, Loles Leon, Fele Martinez, Helio Pedregal, Jose Sancho, Paz Vega.

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

**M**en, not women, are at the emotional heart of "Talk to Her," Pedro Almodovar's 14th feature and follow-up to his 2000 foreign-language Oscar winner, "All About My Mother." An engaging, well-crafted and imaginative meditation on solitude and communication, pic is loosely built around the real-life stories of a woman who emerges from a coma, the rape of a cadaver and the pregnancy of a coma patient. Pic retrieves these taste-

less tales from the edge of credibility and spins them into a low-key piece that is accomplished, graceful and at times genuinely moving, thanks to subtle scripting and sterling perfs. However, as is often the case with Almodovar, full emotional impact is not achieved, as the helmer's manifest concern with creating beautiful art too often ends up looking like mere artifice. Pic opened strongly at home and commercial prospects are positive offshore. "Talk" opens in Italy and France in the next few weeks and Sony Pictures Classics plans a fall release in the U.S.

Film starts with mild-mannered, goodhearted but lonely nurse Benigno (Javier Camara, from TV sitcoms) and Argentine journalist Marco (Dario Grandinetti) sitting next to each other at a modern-dance recital arranged by German choreographer Pina Bausch. Marco is moved, which Benigno recognizes, and the seeds of a bond between the two men are planted.

Benigno takes care — alongside his nurse colleague (Mariola Fuentes) — of dancer Alicia (Leonor Watling), who has been in a coma since a car accident four years earlier. But Benigno's relationship with Alicia is more than professional: Though he met her only briefly, he's in love with her. When Alicia was well, Benigno would spend hours on his balcony watching her practice at a dance school run by Katerina (Geraldine Chaplin).

Also in the hospital is bullfighter Lydia (singer Rosario Flores, her rough-hewn features oozing charisma). Her fading relationship with



**BULL'S-EYE:** Rosario Flores stars as a femme bullfighter in Spanish helmer Pedro Almodovar's 14th feature, "Talk to Her."

her bullfighter b.f., "El Nino de Valencia" (Adolfo Fernandez), is under scrutiny from the paparazzi, and the passionate woman is having troubling handling it emotionally. Marco detects her vulnerability and, in a rather contrived way (following an enjoyable parody of gossip TV, a faint echo of the younger, brasher Almodovar), a relationship between them starts.

In one of several abrupt time shifts, pic jumps forward to the preparations for a bullfight, with lovingly lensed footage of Lydia squeezing into her tight-fitting suit. While receiving the bull *a porta gayloa* (on her knees), Lydia is gored and falls into a coma. Marco blames himself for her lack of concentration, as he has not been able to calm Lydia's jealousy over his previous relationship with Angela (Elena Anaya).

As Alicia and Lydia are in the same hospital, Benigno and Marco meet again. Pic's final movement opens with the news that Alicia, still in coma, is pregnant, and the finger of suspicion points at Benigno.

Pic's take on human solitude suggests that everyone should deal with it in the way that is right for them, however offbeat it may seem to others and as long as it does not cause harm. It's a threadbare theme, but the extremity of Benigno's situation breathes new life into it, and Camara's masterly centerpiece perf prevents the character's love for Alicia from seeming absurd. No other performances match it, though Grandinetti's strong, silent Marco, in a more traditional view of manhood, offers the ideal counterpoint.

Watling's role calls for her to lie motionless on a bed most of the

time. But her brief "living" appearances confirm her as one of Spanish cinema's brightest femme prospects.

Pic is studded with musical/dance set pieces that at times threaten to overshadow the main story. One of these, however, is among the most remarkable sequences in recent Spanish cinema: a beautifully realized, seven-minute mock silent movie, "The Diminishing Lover," which Benigno has recently seen at a cinematheque.

The metaphor here on male sexual insecurities ties in thematically with the rest of pic. But that's not the case with all the set pieces, which break up the narrative flow but do include a tremblingly delicate musical piece from Caetano Veloso that is simply stunning.

Almodovar devotees will be disappointed at pic's lack of humor. However, the film is full of references to helmer's personal likes — from composer Henry Purcell, through "Night of the Hunter," to Almodovar's catholic taste in world music — even if the references don't always enhance the whole.

Overall, tech credits are superb, with a melodically lively score by Alberto Iglesias and the vibrant tones and daring camera angles of lenser Javier Aguirresarobe ideally suited to Almodovar's highly stylized visual sense.

Pic is star-studded, with cameos from well-known Spanish thespis, including fleeting nonspeaking roles for "Mother" stars Marisa Paredes and Cecilia Roth. Most enjoyable is vet Chus Lampreave as a gossipy porter; also, Almodovar's brother-producer Agustin turns up as a priest.