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Man from La Mancha

Pedro Almodóvar, Spain's provocative director, reveals
All About My Mother



Pedro Almodóvar prefers to write about women. He'd rather work with them, too. "I feel envious sometimes because I think [women] have more qualities, the nature gives [them] more qualities than us," says the Spanish director. "The female nature is less prejudiced, is more active, more spontaneous."

Over the course of his 13 films—which include the 1988 *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and the 1997 *Live Flesh*—Almodóvar has directed a diverse range of actresses in rich portrayals of contemporary women's lives that never sink to tired stereotypes. Perhaps that's because, at an early age, he saw some fine acting right in his own home.

"When I talk about women who act I also mean this capacity to fake, to hide, to lie even—but in the best sense," Almodóvar says. "When I mean lying, I mean, for example, in a case where within a family, the mother has to lie to the



father so that there won't be a catastrophe in the house. I remember particularly in the region where I was born, La Mancha, which is, was and continues to be one of the most *machista* regions in Spain, I remember my mother, my grandmother, my aunt outwardly lying to my father and their husbands to prevent tragedies within the house. And they did it very well."

The beauty, pain and permutations of acting and motherhood constantly crisscross in Almodóvar's new film, *All About My Mother*, opening this month in the United States. Manuela (Cecilia Roth, *Dark Habits*, *A Place in the World*) is a single-mother of a teenage son. For his birthday, she has promised to tell him all about the father the boy has never known. But that conversation will never take place because that night her son is hit by a car and killed.

The tragedy moves Manuela to go to Barcelona to look for the boy's father, who calls himself Lola. The search brings her into the lives of women from all walks of life, including Huma (Marisa Paredes, *High Heels*, *The Flower of My Secret*), an actress who is on tour as Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*; the nun Sister Rosa (Penélope Cruz, *Belle Epoque*, *Open Your Eyes*), who has more than one complication; and Rosa's quarrelsome mother (Rosa María Sardá).

No director has more regard for emotionally charged people outside of society's norms than Almodóvar. In his films, the hues of the sets and the characters are vibrant, comical and impassioned, even when life is odd, difficult and sad. Usually empathetic to his female characters, Almodóvar has outdone himself with this film's intriguing ensemble of women.

**Cecilia Roth
and Eloy Azorín
(above) in *All
About My Mother*,
the new film from
director Pedro
Almodóvar (left).**

By Nancy Kapitanoff

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"The film is about women who act. Or men who act like women," says Almodóvar. Above: Marisa Paredes. Left: Cecilia Roth and Antonia San Juan

At the end of *All About My Mother*, Almodóvar dedicates the film to (among others) "Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider ... who have played actresses," and "To all women who act." Almodóvar sees Rowlands, Davis and Schneider as concrete icons within *All About My Mother*. Rowlands' performance in *Opening Night* "inspired" the critical sequence with Manuela's son, Almodóvar says, and "Bette Davis is one of the models for Huma. This is the type of actress that is bigger than the role. Romy Schneider is the

opposite. She's not bigger than the role. She's just into the deepest pain of any character, and that was the reference that I gave to Cecilia Roth.

"I dedicated it particularly to actresses because in this whole business, they are the ones who move me the most," Almodóvar says. "And also obviously because the film is about women who act. Or men who act like women."

Penélope Cruz moved Almodóvar while they were working on *Live Flesh*. That film begins with Cruz's character giving birth to the film's protagonist on a bus. After completing that intense sequence, Almodóvar and Cruz wanted to work together again.

"Everybody talks to me about that scene," Almodóvar says. "This is more than one sequence. It was like eight or 10 minutes. I was trying to make *Speed* with feelings."

"To want to work with Penélope again was completely natural because the experience for both of us was extremely good. There are certain actresses that you sometimes feel were made to work with you—that have a certain tone that you like—and that was the case with Penélope. She's very beautiful and she has a great capacity to be both funny or serious at the same time [while] being very natural, and that works very well for me."



Almodóvar wrote a series of notes to himself before he developed the script for *All About My Mother*. The first was "about someone than can be an actress in her work, but without [actually] being an actress," he says. "Sometimes in regular jobs it is necessary to act. I began doing research and I found many, many jobs where you need that capacity of acting."

The second note was about a mother who had hidden the identity of her son's father from her son. "I took down this note because of a friend of mine who herself had never met her father," Almodóvar says. "Her mother, as an act of revenge, had never told her who he was."

"The third note that I took, it was something real, too. It was actually a story a friend of mine told me, about a man in Barcelona, a transvestite, who went to Paris and got these huge breasts. When he came back to Barcelona, his wife actually said, 'Well, he hasn't changed that much,' and stayed with him. They [opened], like Manuela tells in the film, a small beach bar and, while he went out on the beach with the tiniest bikinis, he wouldn't allow his wife to wear even a miniskirt. I wrote it down because I found it to be the greatest example of machismo I had ever heard of."

"These notes were taken at different times. In the middle of all this, I also saw *Opening Night*, the John Cassavetes movie with Gena Rowlands where she is becoming completely crazy with problems with alcohol. This is one of my favorite American movies in the last 30 years. Putting together all this, the result is *All About My Mother*."

All About My Mother is not all about Almodóvar's mother, but the last line in the film's dedication goes to her. "I

though it was a good movie to dedicate to her," says the 48-year-old filmmaker. "My mother is a different mother than the type of mother in the movie. As an adolescent I didn't have such a good relationship with her. It was also the time that you rebel as a young person. But right now I have a very good relationship with her and I truly think that she has been the inspira-

tion for a lot of my female characters.

"My mother is the typical woman from a small village in Spain. She doesn't really go to the movies, she doesn't even go see my movies, but she belongs to that kind of very strong Spanish women who in the post-civil war in Spain really managed to make us survive. They were physically very strong, they were very liberal in spite of where they were living and capable of doing a lot of things. I mean they could work in the fields in the mornings, keep their houses in the afternoons and raise their children. All this in silence because really, in La Mancha, the place that I was born, the man is god. He's the power."

"In spite of how tough that life was, I think my mother didn't lose her sense of humor," says Almodóvar. "And I think the sense of humor that you see in my films is directly inherited from her." ■