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FILM REVIEWS

Live Flesh (CARNE TREMULA)

(French-Spanish — Drama — Color)

An MGM (in U.S.)/Ciby Distribution (in France)/Warner Espanola (in Spain) release of an El Deseo presentation of a Ciby 2000, France 3 Cinema (France)/El Deseo (Spain) production. (International sales: Ciby 2000, Paris.) Produced by Agustin Almodovar.

Directed by Pedro Almodovar. Screenplay, Almodovar, Ray Loriga, Jorge Guerricaechevarria, based on the novel "Live Flesh" by Ruth Rendell. Camera (color, wide-screen), Affonso Beato; editor, Jose Salcedo; music, Alberto Iglesias; art direction, Antxon Gomez; costume design, Jose Maria de Cossio; sound (Dolby SR Digital), Bernardo Menz, J.A. Bermudez; assistant director, Pedro Lazaga; casting, Katrina Bayonas. Reviewed at UGC Normandie, Paris, Sept. 30, 1997. (In New York, London film festivals.) Running time: 100 min.

David Javier Bardem
Elena Francesca Neri
Victor Liberto Rabal
Clara Angela Molina
Sancho Jose Sancho
Isabelle Penelope Cruz
Dona Centro Pilar Bardem
Bus driver Alex Angulo
(Spanish dialogue)

A single bullet fired during a bungled police intervention causes a ricochet effect in the lives of five characters in "Live Flesh." Pedro Almodovar's carefully layered, interlocking melodrama set in contemporary Madrid boasts hunky guys, passionate women, spiffy widescreen lensing, action and suspense. Both more hopeful and more subversive than its source novel by popular British crime scribe Ruth Rendell, pic is still unmistakably the work of the Spanish iconoclast, yet feels almost serene. Discerning viewers interna-



Javier Bardem, left, and Jose Sancho are cops embroiled in a complex drama in the Pedro Almodovar-directed "Live Flesh."

tionally should be impressed and entertained by the mature flow of the twisty narrative, in which earned emotion takes precedence over shock value. Pic opened Friday in Spain and bows at the end of the month in France.

Arthouse auds in search of outrageous Almodovarian content will find the helmer toned down here — though far from straight-laced as he dishes up an unlikely sequence of events in plausible fashion. Helmer and co-scripters have ingeniously expanded and embellished Rendell's intriguingly insular 1986 novel, made the material 100% Spanish and given it political resonance in the bargain.

Pic begins in January '70 with the onscreen text of Generalissimo Franco's latest edict depriving citizens of their civil rights. A pregnant young prostitute (Penelope Cruz) goes into labor and, in a comical prelude, ends up giving birth to a son, Victor, on a city bus in the dead of night.

Twenty years later, Victor (Liberto Rabal) is a handsome pizza delivery man who can't wait to keep his date with a pretty young Italian girl,

Helena (Francesca Neri). The spoiled only child of a wealthy diplomat and widower, Helena is watching Bunuel's 1955 "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de La Cruz" (whose Spanish title literally means "Rehearsal for a Crime") and waiting for her heroin dealer to arrive when she mistakenly buzzes Victor into her posh building.

Victor is polite; Helena is rude as can be. It turns out she was his first sexual experience and he's eager to court her further; she was stoned at the time and isn't interested now. Meanwhile, two plainclothes cops, virile young David (Javier Bardem) and older, disillusioned, alcoholic Sancho (Jose Sancho), are cruising their beat.

When a gunshot is heard in Helena's building, neighbors summon the police. David and Sancho arrive, observe what looks like a hostile encounter between Helena and Victor and, ignoring standard procedure, enter the apartment with guns drawn. After a tense and ironic scuffle, a gun goes off.

Cut to four years later. Paraplegic

David is now a venerated wheelchair basketball star with merchandising contracts. He's married to Helena, who has cleaned up her act and oversees a shelter for disadvantaged children. Victor is in prison, where he conscientiously betters his mind and body. Mere days after his release, Victor is visiting his mom's grave when he recognizes Helena and David at the funeral of Helena's father. Victor presents his condolences to Helena, who is shaken. At the cemetery, David meets an attractive woman twice his age, Clara (Angela Molina).

This is only the start of a complex tale in which the skeins of fate and coincidence connecting Victor, David, Helena, Clara and Sancho are introduced with a sure and deeply ironic hand. Almodovar treats such heavy themes as destiny and guilt with a deft, unmocking touch. The narrative provides plenty of skewed humor and frank contextual sex as characters' motivations are brought into sharper focus.

Most of all, the satisfyingly cinematic screen adaptation puts motion and energy into a story that was mostly internalized from Victor's perspective in Rendell's book. The script fortifies the novel's premise and ends up making a touching statement about Spain's past travails and its more promising future.

Thesps are all fine, with Bardem's wheelchair moves and Molina's midlife desperation particularly convincing. The warmest winter in Spain's history lent locations in Madrid a far sunnier demeanor than helmer had originally intended.

Widescreen format is employed with finesse, with witty use of camera angles throughout. (Particular visual fun is had with the crucial gunshot.) The extremely varied score seamlessly juggles songs, strings and offbeat instrumental riffs to excellent effect.

— Lisa Nesselson