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# 'Flower' an Elegant, Witty Celebration of Women

## MOVIE REVIEW

By KEVIN THOMAS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

“The Flower of My Secret” certainly sounds like a Pedro Almodóvar movie, yet it marks a decided departure for the prodigious Spanish director. You could even say, to borrow from one of Almodóvar’s most famous titles, that it’s about “a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”

This time, however, Almodóvar

tells his story in a lower key than ever before, with all his usual compassion but without his trademark outrageousness. The film could be described as a serious comedy, its humor growing out of a keen sense of life’s absurdities. When near the end of the film his heroine refers to George Cukor’s “Rich and Famous,” you realize how much “The Flower of My Secret” is in the tradition of Cukor—elegant, witty, wise and deeply caring of women. An intimate, beautifully wrought work, it reflects a new maturity in Almodóvar’s work and is one of

**Please see ‘FLOWER,’ F7**



JEAN MARIE LEROY

Rossy de Palma, left, Marisa Paredes in “Flower of My Secret”: Writer-director Pedro Almodóvar departs from his usual outrageousness.

# 'FLOWER': Witty Celebration of Women

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his best pictures, right up there with "What Have I Done to Deserve This?" and "Law of Desire."

It begins deceptively, with a shot of a woman being told by two young doctors that her son is dead and that it would be a good idea to donate his transplantable organs. The woman is actually a nurse, and the scene is part of a seminar conducted by a psychologist, Betty (Carmen Elfas), teaching physicians how best to break tragic news and then request organ donations. The psychologist's best friend, Leo (Marisa Paredes), arrives just as Betty is observing that "relatives will grasp at life, no matter how absurd."

It's an apt remark, for Leo is herself grasping at a marriage that is already dead. Clearly, it's not for nothing that her husband (the veteran Imanoel Arias, in an incisive cameo), a military professional, has volunteered for duty with the NATO peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and is currently stationed in Brussels.

A successful romance novelist for 20 years, Leo is so distraught she's come to Betty to pull off the too-tight boots her husband gave her two years earlier. Betty does more than that: She refers Leo to a friend, Angel (Juan Echanove), editor of the arts and literature section of a major Madrid daily.

"The Flower of My Secret" then

becomes a portrait of an attractive, sensual, intelligent woman at a crossroads in both her personal and professional lives. She's coming to realize that she's outgrown being secretly Amanda Gris, the Barbara Cartland of Spain, and is eager to write seriously of women's literature.

Amusingly, Angel, an intellectual, like many others, intrigued with the potency of kitsch, actually enjoys the Gris novels, which Leo has come to dismiss as "routine, self-indulgent sentimentality." Angel is also much attracted to Leo, but how will she respond to a short, fat guy? You'd suspect that a cuddly teddy bear of a man, full of warmth and charm, is just what the doctor would order for Leo after a coldly handsome husband who's on the verge of leaving her for good. More important, Leo discovers in Angel that she has a friend.

What makes Leo's self-discovery with its possibilities of a new friendship, or a new love, so special is that as commanding a presence as Paredes is—she was the self-obsessed cabaret singer in Almodóvar's "High Heels"—Almodóvar concerns himself with all the other women in the film. In doing so, he celebrates the capacity of women to rise above their own needs and problems and to reach out to others.

For all of her assurance and concern for Leo, Betty will end up

putting their friendship to the severest of tests. Leo's sister (Rossy de Palma) and their irascible mother (Chus Lampreave)—both actresses are Almodóvar favorites—wrangle constantly but each is capable of seeing beyond their conflicts. Almodóvar also pays attention to Leo's loyal maid (Kiti Manver), who we're surprised to discover was once a celebrated flamenco dancer her son (Joaquin Cortés) wants to lure out of retirement to help launch his own dancing career.

Beautifully wrought and wonderfully acted, "The Flower of My Secret" is in fact the kind of film that George Cukor often made—and he surely would have been delighted at Almodóvar's deft blend of humor, tenderness and wisdom.

■ **MPAA rating: R, for language and brief sexuality. Times guidelines: This is a mature film with adult themes unsuitable for small children.**

## 'The Flower of My Secret'

|                     |       |
|---------------------|-------|
| Marisa Paredes..... | Leo   |
| Juan Echanove.....  | Angel |
| Imanoel Arias.....  | Paco  |
| Carmen Elfas.....   | Betty |

A Sony Pictures Classics release of a Franco-Spanish co-production: El Deseo, S.A., and Ciby 2000. Writer-director Pedro Almodóvar. Executive producer Agustin Almodóvar. Cinematographer Alfonso Beato. Editor José Salcedo. Music Alberto Iglesias. Costumes Hugo Mezcuca. Art director Wolfgang Burmann. In Spanish with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

■ *Exclusively at the Royal Theater, 11523 Santa Monica Blvd., West Los Angeles, (310) 477-5581.*