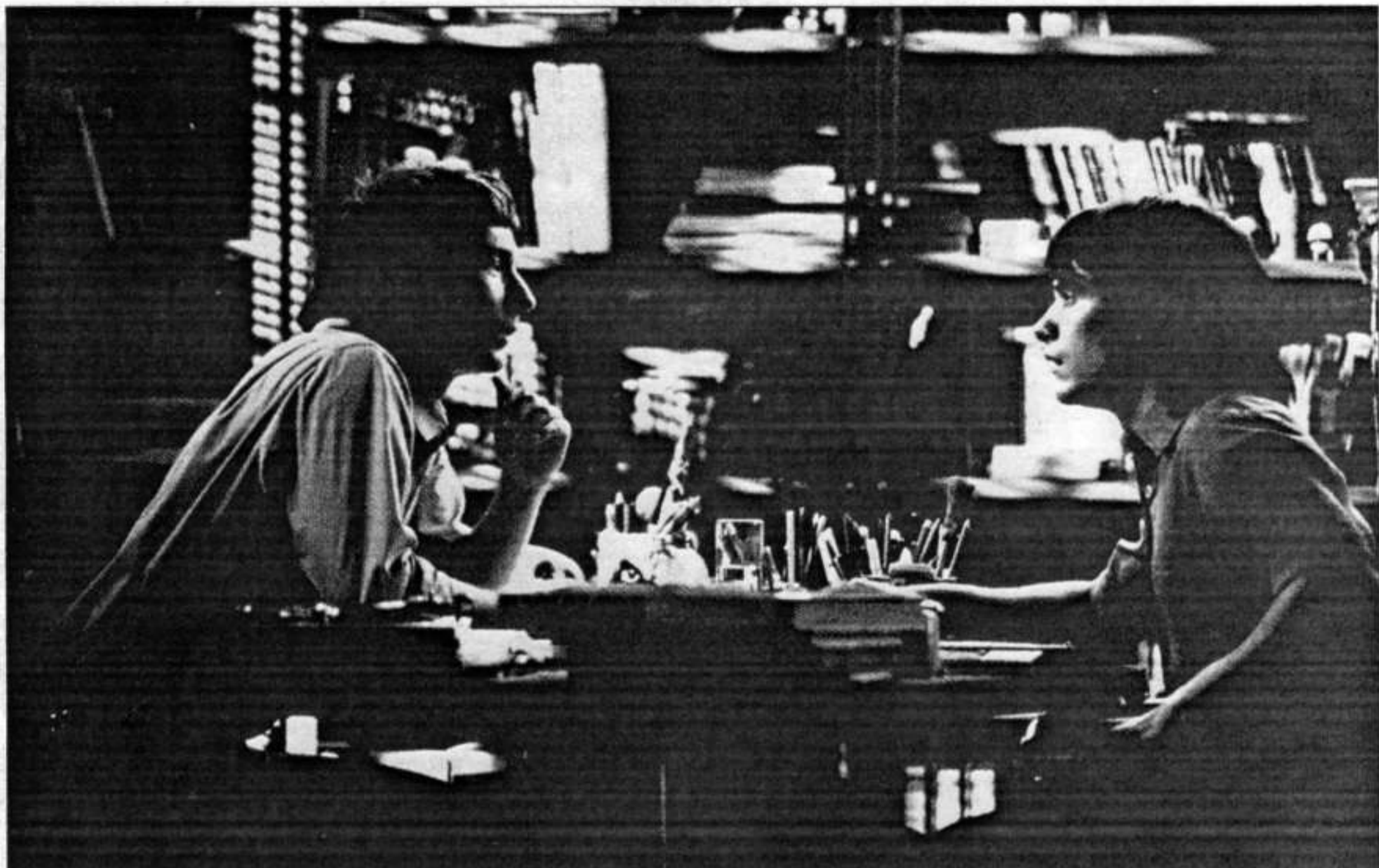


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PERFECT PITCH: Gael Garcia Bernal, right, pitches a story idea to Fele Martinez in helmer Pedro Almodovar's "Bad Education," which will open the Cannes Film Festival in May.

A NOIR LOOK AT RELIGION

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

Pedro Almodovar's long-gestated, instantly identifiable "Bad Education" welds autobiographical matter relating to his troubled religious education onto a classic noir structure, repping a generic shift from the classy, emotionally involving mellers that have dominated his recent output. Superbly orchestrated, visually impressive pic has the potential to extend Almodovar's offshore appeal beyond its already broad arthouse-to-crossover base. Pic has already pre-sold to several major territories, including the U.S. (where Sony Classics plans a fall release). Following its

Spanish bow March 19, pic opens the Cannes Film Festival in May.

"Education," as per every project by Europe's premier arthouse helmer, comes with a scent of scandal. Its release comes at a time when revelations of abuse are shaking the foundations of Catholicism in the U.S. Marketing will determine if and how this will affect the film's commercial prospects.

Classy, '60s-style mock thriller credits, courtesy of Juan Gatti, open on to 1980 Madrid, and the office of

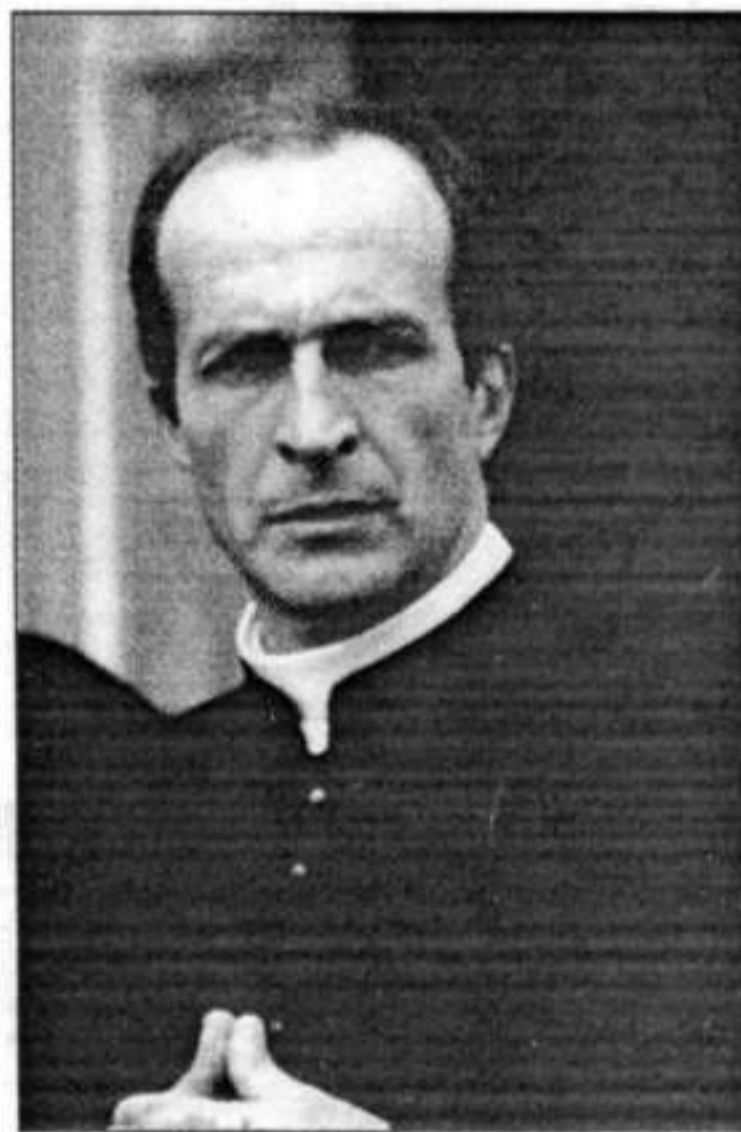
youthful but blocked movie director Enrique Goded (Fele Martinez).

While going through newspaper clippings in search of inspiration, he's interrupted by a wannabe actor and old school-mate (Mexican thesp Gael Garcia Bernal), who gives Enrique a story he's written, "The Visit." This friend, it turns out, was Enrique's first love at the school they attended, a strongly disciplinarian, Salesian Catholic institution.

Enrique reads "The Visit," which then turns into a film within the

BAD EDUCATION

Directed by
Pedro Almodovar
Starring:
Fele Martinez,
Gael Garcia Bernal and
Daniel Gimenez Cacho



CONFLICTED PRIEST: Daniel Gimenez Cacho stars in drama which Sony Classics will release in the U.S. in the fall.

film. Transvestites Paca (Javier Camara, wonderfully mannered in pic's sole comic turn) and Zahara (also Garcia Bernal) are treading the boards in a seedy nightclub. After Zahara picks up a character called Enrique (Alberto Ferreiro) — who falls asleep while they're having sex — he realizes Enrique is his old lover from school.

Short of money, Zahara revisits the school, where he meets his former lit teacher, Father Manolo

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BAD EDUCATION

(LA MALA EDUCACION)

(SPAIN)

A Warner Sogefilms (in Spain)/Sony Pictures Classics (in U.S.) release of an El Deseo production, in association with TVE, Canal Plus. (International sales: Focus Features, New York.) Produced by Agustin Almodovar. Executive producer, Esther Garcia.

Directed, written by Pedro Almodovar. Camera (color, widescreen), Jose Luis Alcaine; editor, Jose Salcedo; music, Alberto Iglesias; art director, Antxon Gomez; sound (Dolby Digital), Miguel Rejas. Reviewed at Warner Sogefilms screening room, Madrid, March 4, 2004. (Also in Cannes Film Festival — opener.) Running time: 104 MIN.

Enrique Goded Fele Martinez
School Friend/

Zahara Gael Garcia Bernal
Father Manolo Daniel Gimenez Cacho
Sr. Berenguer Lluís Homar
Paca Javier Camara
Mother Petra Martinez
Young Ignacio Nacho Perez
Young Enrique Raul Garcia Forneiro
Enrique

(in "The Visit") Alberto Ferreiro

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(Daniel Gimenez Cacho). He attempts to blackmail the priest with stories about Father Manolo's sexual abuse of a boy called Ignacio.

Pic flashes back to a boy called Ignacio (Nacho Perez). Father Manolo plays guitar on a river bank as Ignacio, in one of pic's few nods to the kitsch Almodovar of old, sings "Moon River" for him. The following scenes, which are film's strongest, depict the priest's frustrated love for Ignacio in parallel with Ignacio's developing love for a boy called Enrique (Raul Garcia Forneiro).

Back in the movie proper, Enrique decides to make the script his next project. His school friend-cum-actor is keen to play Zahara. Enrique is not sure about this, or even whether his pal is who he says he is. The latter storms off, but leaves behind his cigarette lighter, with an address of a bar on it. This leads Enrique to Galicia in northern Spain, where he meets the school friend's mother (Petra Martinez) and finds out the truth.

Almodovar aficionados will be reassured that most of his later stylistic hallmarks are present: abundant pop-culture refs in the form of cheesy Italian pop songs, nods to classic movies and film posters; a brief trip to a pueblo, which contrasts with the slick urban setting of the rest of pic; games with identity and fiction vs. reality; and, as ever, truckloads of transvestites.

In terms of plotting, "Education" is Almodovar's most ambitious project to date. But the Russian-doll structure hangs together beautifully, and parallels between the three main storylines cleverly lend a sense of mass to the whole edifice, even when some developments are over-signaled.

The price the pic pays for the pleasing complexity of its plot is a lack of room for maneuvering characterization. One of the joys of Almodovar's movies has always been their offbeat throwaway lines and oblique, ironic glances; here, there are precious few of either. Humor, likewise, is scarce.

The shift away from melodrama leads to a loss of the emotional undertow visible in recent Almodovar pics like "Talk to Her," with their grief-stricken, profoundly sympathetic protags. It's ironic that the most affecting moments are for the hateful but weak Father Manolo, as he struggles to control his inner conflict. Other characters are largely a gallery of self-seeking types.

The large cast is mostly fine, with

Garcia Bernal nicely nuancing his overlapping roles (and acquitting himself well in a Spanish, rather than Mexican, accent). Gimenez Cacho is superb as the quiet-spoken, stiff-backed Father Manolo, his gaunt features registering both pleasure and shame. Whippet-faced Martinez plays Enrique rather too coolly, given the emotional depths the character must be plumbing.

Antxon Gomez's sumptuous art direction and Almodovar's perfectionist eye pick out prettiness in even the least promising of images, such as torn posters on an old cinema wall. But the visual assault of dense, creamily rich colors and super-crisp light and shadow, always framed to perfection, feels at odds with the priests' squalid morality. A lengthy swimming pool sequence is erotic but emotionally barren, with an emphasis on beauty per se — dripping buttocks, slo-mo bodies underwater — that is closer to musicvideos.

Contrast between the repressive Spain of the boys' childhood and the explosive moral release of the country during the late '70s is elegantly rendered by small details. One example is how '60s actress Sara Montiel is shown later to become a gay icon.

Tech credits, courtesy of Almodovar's stalwarts, are outstanding, with Miguel Rejas' sound work deserving special mention. Alberto Iglesias' jagged, Bernard Herrmann-inspired score is suitably menacing.