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ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER

Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

A Sony Pictures Classics release

Opens November 19

SECRET DÉFENSE

Directed by Jacques Rivette

Written by Rivette, Pascal Bonitzer,

and Emmanuelle Cuau

At Anthology Film Archives

November 19 through December 2

Long-established, if not altogether consistent, pillars of the European art film, the Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar and the Frenchman Jacques Rivette are predictable only in their perversity. In Rivette's case, flouting the norms is generally a matter of form; for Almodóvar, however, it's more like mother's milk.

Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* is as straightforward and plot-driven as any movie about life imitating art imitating life could possibly be. While Almodóvar has never lacked for international attention—in America, he's surely been the most widely distributed foreign-language filmmaker of the past 15 years—with his 13th feature, the 48-year-old writer-director has received the best notices of his career, and not without reason.

Erupting out of the Super-8 underground, Almodóvar started wild and then, after the superb one-two punch of *Matador* and *Law of Desire*, turned wildly uneven. Hot fluff like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *High Heels* gave way to the sour s/m of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* and *Kika*, and the less-than-successful attempts to break into something more sober with *The Flower of My Secret* and *Live Flesh*. *All About My Mother* is the achieved synthesis of the whole Almodóvar variety show, a new genre—part farce, part weepie, low camp and high melodrama, caustic yet heartwarming, humanist and programmatically gender-blurring.

Opening with a close-up pan down an IV drip, *All About My Mother* is concerned with scripting its own mortality. Almodóvar evokes sacred texts only to rewrite them. The nurse Manuela (Cecilia Roth) and her teenage son Esteban watch *All About Eve* on TV, then, to celebrate his birthday, take in a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The play already has talismanic significance for Manuela—she met her long-vanished husband in an amateur production wherein she played Stella to his Stanley. It acquires even greater weight when, after the performance, Esteban dies in an attempt to secure an autograph from the diva Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes), who plays Blanche DuBois.

More screwball tragedy: After arranging for Esteban's heart to be transplanted, devastated Manuela goes to Barcelona in search of the boy's father, once Esteban but now Lola. Cruising the local meat market in an absurdly lyrical sequence, she finds instead Lola's transsexual friend La Agrado (Antonia San Juan), who gets most of the movie's best lines: "All I have that's real are my feelings and those pints of silicone that weigh a ton." Manuela also encounters a beautiful young nun (Pene-



RAIN IN SPAIN: ROTH AND ELOY AZORÍN IN *ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER*

lope Cruz) who happens to be pregnant. As God is everywhere, so *A Streetcar Named Desire* is playing here too. Manuela goes backstage, like (but unlike) Eve Harrington, and winds up as Huma's personal assistant.

All About My Mother is a movie in which wallpaper patterns border on the lysergic, women typically wear red, and characters are prone to compare any given situation to something out of *How to Marry a Millionaire*. It is also a movie in which forms of motherhood proliferate—as does the kindness of strangers—and fathers are generally worse than useless. Although Manuela never gets over her son's death (throughout, she is compelled to repeat the story of his fatal accident), Almodóvar does contrive to crown her maternal sorrow with a climactic miracle.

The filmmaker dedicates *All About My Mother* to "all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers," and to his own mother. Pagan as Almodóvar's exuberance may be, his cult of the Madonna, his meditation on the notion of a virgin birth, and his insistence on martyrdom all seem profoundly Catholic. In any case, I'd very much like to have our mayor

(no mean cross-dresser himself) see the movie and explain how it's not.