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OPENING NIGHT

FEMALE TROUBLE

The leading name in Spanish cinema since the 1980s, Pedro Almodóvar continues to delight audiences with his wacky humor as well as his tender portrayals of women. As his thirteenth feature, *All About My Mother*, opens the New York Film Festival, ANNETTE INSDORF considers the work of this cinematador.

Spain and screwball comedy were hardly compatible entities—until Pedro Almodóvar. Fiercely original, darkly funny, and pungently controversial, he revolutionized the Spanish cinema with movies like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). It was not only the biggest box-office success in Spain, but an international phenomenon: his seventh feature opened the New York Film Festival, and earned the Best Screenplay Prize at the Venice Film Festival, the New York Film Critics Award for Best Foreign Film, and an Academy Award nomination. ▶

Director at work: Pedro Almodóvar

TERESA ISASI

His earlier movies, such as *Matador* (1986), dangle fiery and provocative images before the viewer—like a matador holding a red cape before a bull. Nevertheless, if the aim of the bullfighter is ultimately to destroy the animal whose gaze he holds, the intentions of this filmmaker are considerably more benign. “I’m looking for a complicity with the audience,” Almodóvar has said. “I like to start my pictures in a very strong way so the viewer feels violently interested in what will happen.”

He has indeed captured the attention of an increasingly large international audience, from his breakthrough farce, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1985)—discovered at the Film Society and MOMA’s collaborative program “New Directors/New Films”—through *Law of Desire* (1987), *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1990), *High Heels* (1991), and *Kika* (1993). These fulfill the promise glimpsed in his first three features, *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980), *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), and *Dark Habits* (1984).

Victoria Abril and Antonio Banderas in Almodóvar’s Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!

Almodóvar has been compared to filmmakers from Buñuel to Fassbinder, but perhaps John Waters is the most kindred spirit. Both established their reputations through outrageously stylized and often campy “midnight” movies; the more recent efforts of both are



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cheerfully accessible. Indeed, *Female Trouble*—the title of one of Waters's more notorious films—is an apt description for much of Almodóvar's cinema.

After moving to Madrid from his native La Mancha, Almodóvar worked for the telephone company, wrote storylines for comic strips, and contributed to “underground” magazines. But filmmaking became a passion as he tried his hand with low-budget Super-8 pictures, often accompanied by his lively voice-over commentary. He finally left the world of official telecommunication to create more personal—and passionate—realms.

Almodóvar's popularity in Spain has grown not only because of his irreverent films; he is also a singer, writer, and radio personality. Moreover, under a pseudonymous female byline, he is the author of the serialized memoirs of “Pati Difusa,” an international porn star.

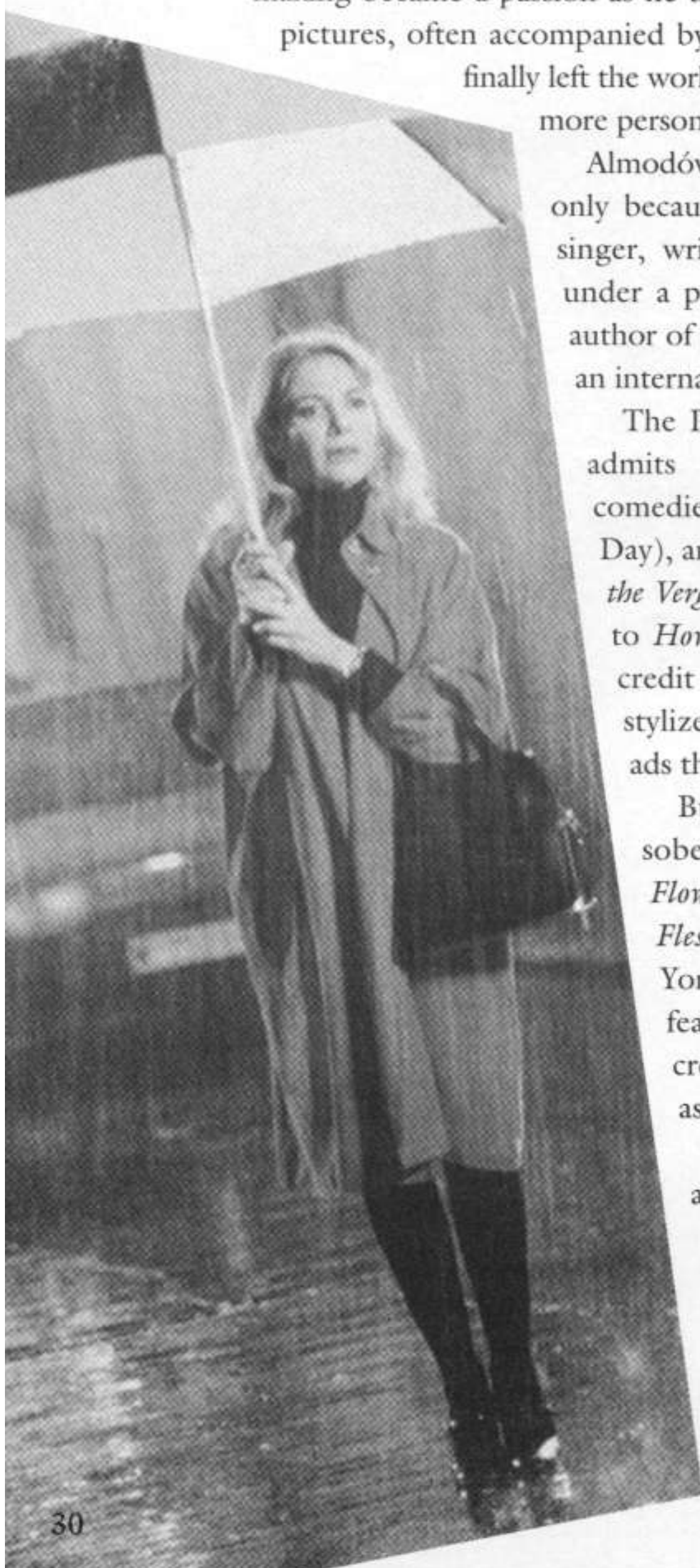
The Preston Sturges of Madrid, Almodóvar admits to being influenced by American comedies of the 1950s (like those with Doris Day), and says that the visual style of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is connected to *How to Marry a Millionaire*. The opening credit sequence cheerfully sets the film's stylized tone, showing women in magazine ads that date back 30 years.

But his recent work reveals decidedly sober and mature intentions, notably *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) as well as *Live Flesh* (1997), both presented at the New York Film Festival. And with his thirteenth feature, *All About My Mother*, Almodóvar creates a new genre—“screwball drama,” as he aptly puts it.

Winner of the prize for Best Direction at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival (the

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Cecilia Roth as Manuela in Almodóvar's latest film, *All About My Mother*

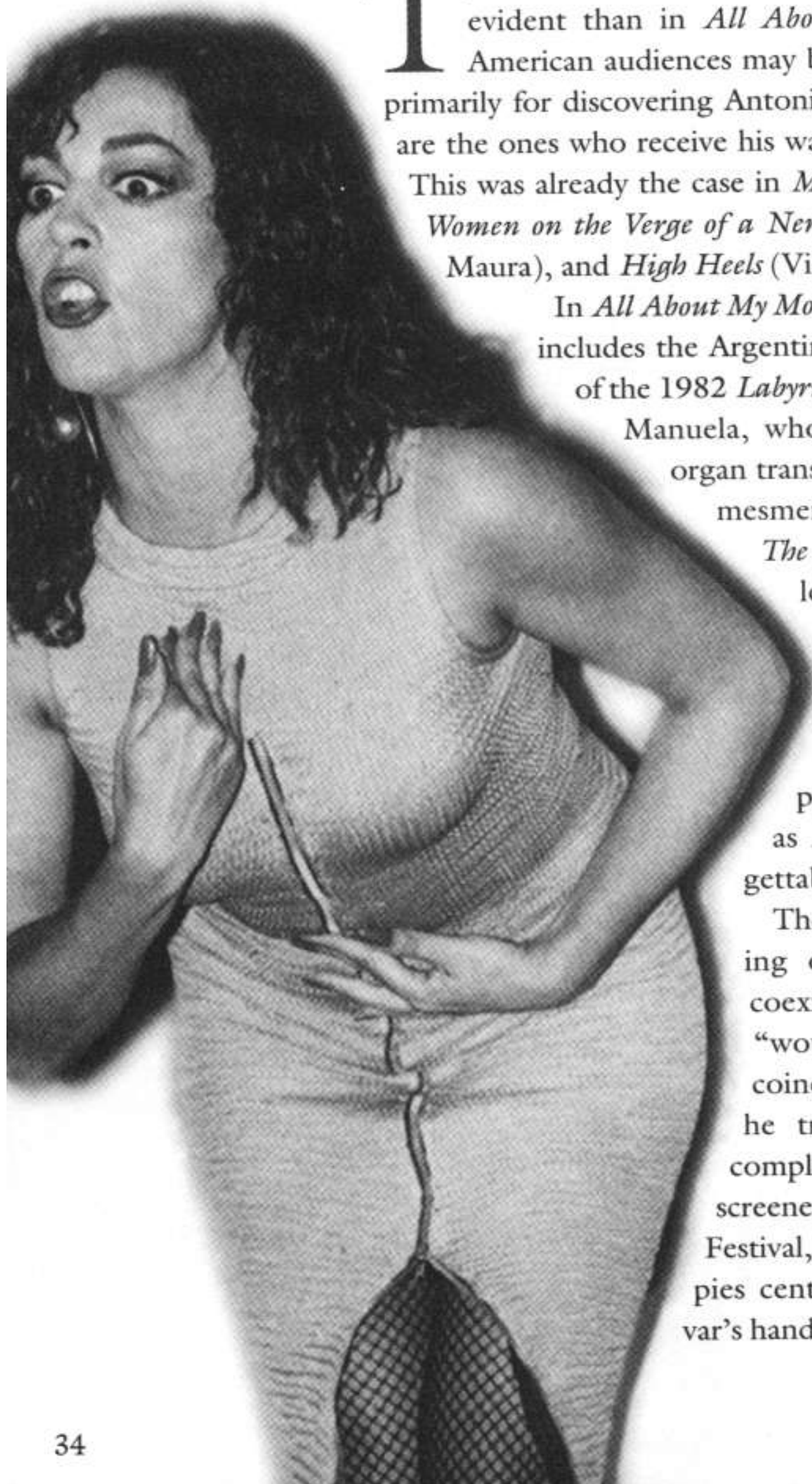


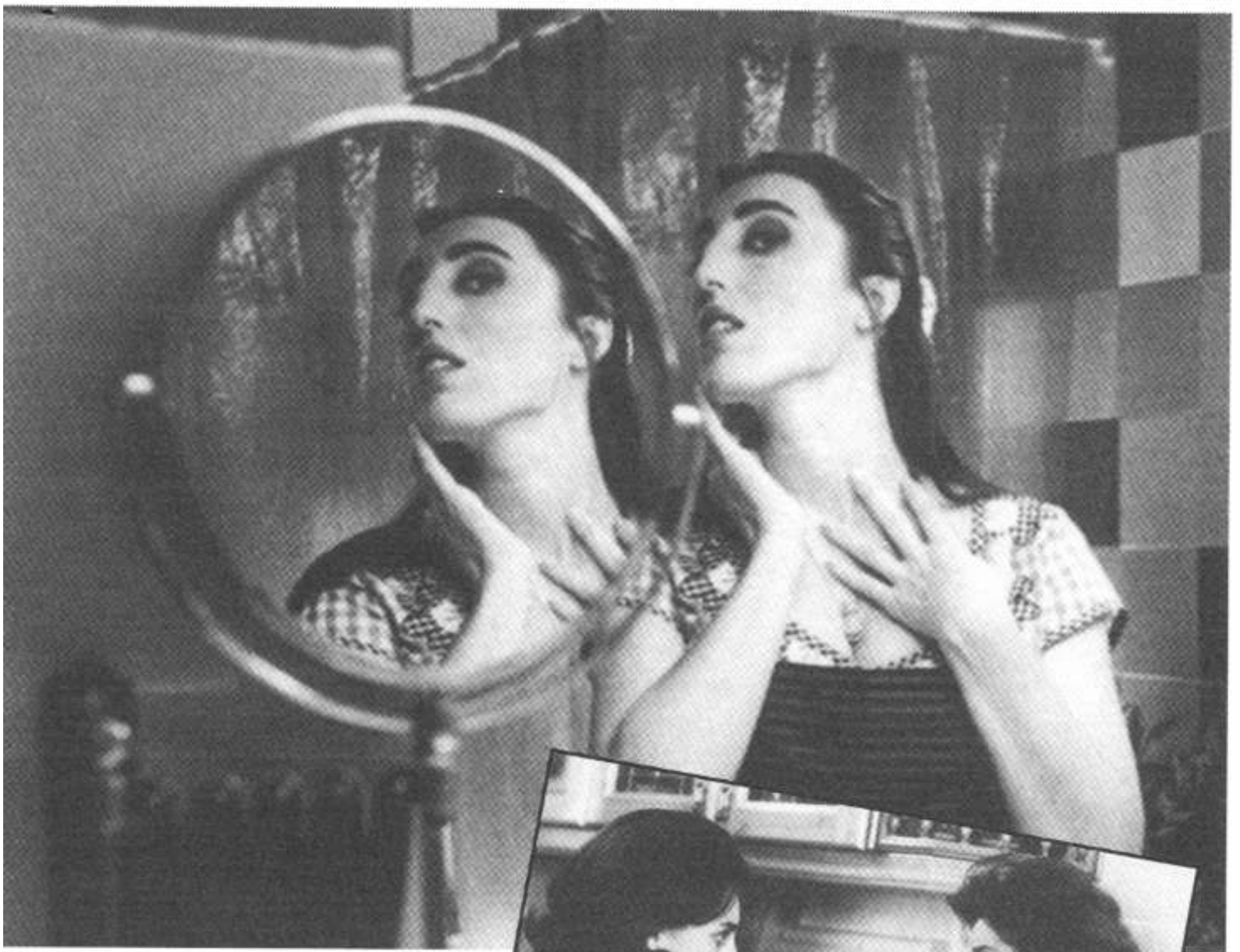
only award to receive a standing ovation), *All About My Mother* takes its title and its tone from more dramatic American sources: *All About Eve* (which the heroine and her teenage son watch at the film's opening), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (the play to which she takes him for his birthday), and *Opening Night* (about which Almodóvar says: "I've been obsessed with Cassavetes' film since seeing it in Cannes in 1992").

The director's love of actresses is nowhere more evident than in *All About My Mother*. Although American audiences may be indebted to Almodóvar primarily for discovering Antonio Banderas, female actors are the ones who receive his warmest cinematic embrace. This was already the case in *Matador* (Assumpta Serna), *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (Carmen Maura), and *High Heels* (Victoria Abril).

In *All About My Mother*, his rich female gallery includes the Argentine-born Cecilia Roth (star of the 1982 *Labyrinth of Passion*) as the nurse Manuela, who works in a hospital for organ transplants; Marisa Paredes (so mesmerizing in *High Heels* and *The Flower of My Secret*) as the lesbian stage star Huma, who incarnates Blanche DuBois; Penelope Cruz as the kind and pregnant Sister Rosa; and cabaret performer Antonia San Juan as Agrado, the film's unforgettable comic discovery.

The outrageous gender-bending of *All About My Mother* coexists with the theme of "wounded maternity" (a term coined by Almodóvar), which he treats with sympathy and complexity. As in many films screened at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival, the pain of mothers occupies center stage. But in Almodóvar's hands, this suffering is tempered





by a resilience, a female feistiness rooted in the ability to improvise.

“I thought about women in my own family, in my village, who I saw ‘faking’ with men in order to save a difficult situation,” Almodóvar says. “While men can lie better, women have a greater capacity to play-act.” His attraction to films about actresses finds its greatest expression in *All About My Mother*, whose ending dedication invokes Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night*, Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, and Romy Schneider in *L'Important c'est d'aimer*.

“Women have become a special genre for me,” Almodóvar confesses, “like Westerns or science fiction.”



Opposite: Carmen Maura in *Law of Desire*. Top: Rossy de Palma and (inset) with Marisa Paredes in *The Flower of My Secret*.

Annette Insdorf, whose latest book is Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski (Miramax Books), is Director of Undergraduate Film Studies at Columbia University.