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Carmen Maura: the embodiment of passion

By love possessed

Upholding the Law of Desire

by Charles Taylor

LAW OF DESIRE. Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. With Eusebio Poncela, Carmen Maura, Antonio Banderas, Miguel Molina, and Manuela Velasco. A Cinevista release. At the Nickelodeon.

Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) is a director who makes elegant homoerotic fantasies that are a huge hit with the public. People seem truly turned on by his films (which have pseudo-arty titles like *The Paradigm of the Clam* or *Ass-face*). They're always approaching him to rhapsodize over how many times they've seen them, and one fellow gets so excited after attending a premiere of Pablo's latest that he rushes into the men's room to masturbate. Pablo's scenarios are all about unrestrained passion, but he can't rouse in himself what he writes about or what he incites in an audience. (Juan, the working-class boy he's in love with, doesn't love him back and is about to leave Madrid to return to his home near the sea anyway.) Like Pablo, Tina (Carmen Maura), his transsexual actress sister, is romantically alone, having been abandoned by her lesbian lover, who has also left her 13-year-old daughter, Ada (Manuela Velasco), for Tina to take care of. But

though Tina feels fated to remain loveless, she is (unlike her brother) boiling over with passion, from her flaming red hair and skin-tight dresses, which force her to take careful steps in her spiked heels, to her fiery temper, which lets her haul off and belt a cop when he says she isn't a woman. *Law of Desire*, the wonderful new farcical melodrama from the gifted Spanish writer/director Pedro Almodóvar, is about how the passion Pablo compartmentalizes in his work spills over into his life and turns it upside down. The only law that desire observes, Almodóvar is saying, is recklessness.

The catalyst who shakes up Pablo's ordered existence is Antonio (Antonio Banderas), the spoiled son of a conservative politician. He's the one who relieves himself in the men's room after seeing Pablo's movie, and after that he begins to shadow Pablo. When he finally gets up the nerve to approach him, Pablo invites him home, prompting Antonio to remark that he usually doesn't sleep with guys. But when Pablo begins to leave, it's Antonio who overtakes him and pulls him along impatiently. In the morning, Antonio has decided he loves Pablo, and for him that means not only replastering Pablo's bathroom or scrubbing him in the

shower as if he were a child, but possessing him completely, a desire that soon reaches irrational, dangerous extremes that Pablo has no idea how to cope with. Banderas uses his surly baby face to suggest Antonio's pampered, well-fed quality; it's the face of someone who's used to getting what he wants and having someone else clean up his messes. When he gets in trouble, his protective mother (Helga Line) is there to shelter him. If he's completely selfish about his own wants, though, he also has a child's quality of unthinking honesty. He doesn't hesitate to kiss Pablo on the street in broad daylight or to blurt out to him that he read a letter from Juan. What Antonio doesn't know is that the letter, which triggers a jealous rage in him, is one Pablo sent to Juan and asked him to sign and return as a fantasy letter he'd like to receive.

Once again, Pablo is using a fiction to create the passion that doesn't exist in his life. There's nothing prissy about Pablo; he's as generous and adoring to Tina and Ada as can be. But in his romantic life he's as distanced as his tight smile and icy blue eyes suggest. Asked by a TV interviewer what he thinks about romantic love, he says, "You can't concentrate. That's what horrifies me and attracts me." He certainly can't consign Antonio to the files he keeps on his fictional characters. He's attracted to obsessive material, but it's the style of his artifice rather than the heat of his emotions that stands out. Pablo directs Tina in a stage production of *The Human Voice*, Cocteau's dramatic monologue of a woman talking on the phone to the lover who's left her, a piece that climaxes with the woman strangling herself with the telephone cord. The image we see from his production is lovely and mysterious: Ada, dressed in the white communion gown Pablo promised her, is pulled across the stage on a treadmill as she mimes and lip-synchs a hymn; behind her, Tina, dressed in a slip and looking bedraggled, attacks the set with an ax. But as if to defy Pablo, the scene makes emotional sense only when it's colored with real-life emotion. Just before Ada's next entrance, Tina looks to see the lover who abandoned her — Ada's mother — standing in the wings. Tina flings the most pain-filled lines at her, and when Ada, who now understands where the anguish in Tina's performance comes from, appears again, her tears and her own singing accompany the recorded music. Pablo's immaculately designed *Human Voice* is entered by a genuine human voice. Typically, he tells Tina that she was overacting.

If in the opening sections Eusebio Poncela comes across as rather bland, this fits the movie's design, preparing us for the transition in his character toward the end. But it also allows Carmen Maura to command the center of attention, and she gives a smashing performance, deliciously funny and ripely sensual. Maura played the haggard, No-Doz popping housewife of Almodóvar's *What Have I Done To Deserve This!* — a fine performance that nevertheless didn't prepare you for what she does here. There's no mistaking Tina for an actress. Pablo isn't wrong when he says she overacts (though not in that stage performance), but he misses the point, because her life is her greatest role, and if she plays it to the hilt, there's little she dramatizes that she doesn't actually feel. Acting out her romantic disappointments is the only way for her to transcend them. That's why she's so mad when Pablo models a character on her; she intensifies her feelings, and she knows Pablo's stylish treatment will cool them out.

Maura provides the movie with its funniest moments: taking Ada to the church where she used to sing in the choir as a young boy and asking the priest whether he remembers her; begging a worker who's hosing down the gutters to hose her down as well and yelling with pleasure as the water hits her full force; visiting the hospital where Pablo is recuperating after a car accident and dispensing gifts to the patients who gather around her like a voluptuous, whorish saint as she says, "There's nothing like charity." Tina is never going to get a better role. She's not just female, she's triumphantly female. There isn't a dull moment in the movie, but it really takes off when Maura's on screen. You can feel Almodóvar caught in the whirlwind she stirs up.

If Maura moves beyond her work in *What Have I Done To Deserve This!*, so does Almodóvar. That film was inventive but thin. Although it had dozens of good ideas and a scrappy, surreal gutter spark, it didn't add up, and the ending was a failure of nerve. *Law of Desire* is more daring in conception, but beyond that you can feel Almodóvar taking his chances with tremendous confidence, like a musician embarking on a risky solo he knows in his gut he can pull off. The result is enormously entertaining, just about the best time I've had at the movies this year. The look of the film, which is shot in hard, bright tones by Ángel Luis Fernández, is full of the pleasures of style. The characters dress in loud colors (Pablo wears an electric blue suit with a hot pink shirt, and another shirt of his, a satiny blue number with the zodiac printed on it, figures prominently), and there are felicities such as Tina and Ada (who's like a cotton-candy punkette) wearing the same red sunglasses or matching Betty Boop nightshirts, and their shrine where statues of the Virgin share space with photos of Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor.

In *Law of Desire*, Almodóvar grounds his farce and his uninhibited eroticism in '40s Hollywood melodrama. Just as Jacques Demy both employed and poked fun at the conventions of musicals in *Lola*, Almodóvar kids melodrama and reheats the driven-by-passion clichés. The credits are a flashlight shining on the pages of a rumpled script, as if this were an old story being pulled out of a studio's back files. The danger in Almodóvar's method is that audiences may see only half of what he's doing. Whereas the knowingness of Demy's film was ignored by those who thought he didn't realize how silly his plot contrivances were, Almodóvar's audience may

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choose to believe he's only mocking. But Almodóvar knows that the twists of melodrama can be used to express the unruliness of passion, just as he knows the skewed, skittering sexual identities he plays with don't distort the way people experience that passion. The scene with the wildest twist is also the one with the most heart. After a car accident, Pablo suffers from temporary amnesia, and in order to jog his memory Tina reveals the circumstances surrounding her sex change. As a teenage boy, she carried on a love affair with their father, and after running away with him to Morocco she had the operation to please him. When he left her she was desolate, but returning to Madrid for her mother's funeral she was reunited with Pablo, who still loved her and was now ~~alone~~

alone. It's a turn of events so crazy you can't help but laugh, but you can't help being touched when the two embrace.

Almodóvar may be an unrepentant hedonist, but he's also very canny about the movie's depiction of pleasure. During their first time in bed, Antonio asks Pablo whether he has any diseases, and Pablo suggests that if he's going to worry about that they might as well call the whole thing off. This may sound like a dangerous caprice, and Pablo's amorous adventures, which have real heat, could be a fantasy of a time before AIDS. Yet Almodóvar is far from ignorant of the disease. At a time when we regularly hear predictions that movie sexuality will soon revert

where's the rest of the