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Pedro Almodóvar, Tempted by Austerity

■ **Movies:** The maturing of Spain's most famous director continues. He calls it being 'more real.' The new reality may include making a film in Hollywood.

By KEVIN THOMAS
TIMES STAFF WRITER

For more than 10 years Pedro Almodóvar has been Spain's highest-profile director, celebrated around the world for his series of sexy, outrageous comedies. They generally center on the problems women have with men and are best represented by "What Have I Done to Deserve This?" (1985), a dark comedy about a fed-up housewife that became Spain's most successful film ever and an Oscar nominee, and by "Law of Desire" (1987), a love triangle involving a fiery transsexual. Both starred the formidable Carmen Maura.

In its subject his latest—and one of his best—pictures, "The Flower of My Secret," currently at the Royal in West L.A. and the Esquire in Pasadena, could be described as about "a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown," to borrow from the title of one of his most famous films. Although amusing, it's surprisingly low-key, suggesting a new maturity in Almodóvar's career after his last two pictures, the comparatively minor comedies as "High Heels" and "Kika."

"The quick way of saying it is that I'm afraid I am more mature than before," Almodóvar acknowledged while in town recently for his latest film's opening. "I can't avoid not being more conscious

about myself and the world around me. I needed to go in a general direction toward being more real. I also wanted to make a more austere movie—you could say I was tempted by austerity."

Sitting in the spacious living room of his villa at a West Hollywood hotel, Almodóvar, who has a mischievous look even when he's being dead serious, has slimmed down considerably over the past year or so and never looked better. He said that his unusual surname is Arabic, meaning "The Conqueror," a rather appropriate name for a successful filmmaker. "I like to be spontaneous in my life and in my work, but I can't say I have inner peace."

"The Flower of My Secret" stars Marisa Paredes as a chic middle-aged woman, a successful writer of romance novels, whose life and career start coming apart when she finally succeeds through sheer anxiety in driving away the husband she's so desperately afraid of losing in the first place. Almodóvar said that with Dorothy Parker's "Wonderful Leave," which deals with the breakup of a marriage when the military-man husband is home on leave, as an inspiration, he commenced writing the script for "Flower." (His heroine's husband, coolly played by Imanol Arias, is seen only on a brief furlough; he's a military strategist who has volunteered his services with the NATO

forces in Bosnia.)

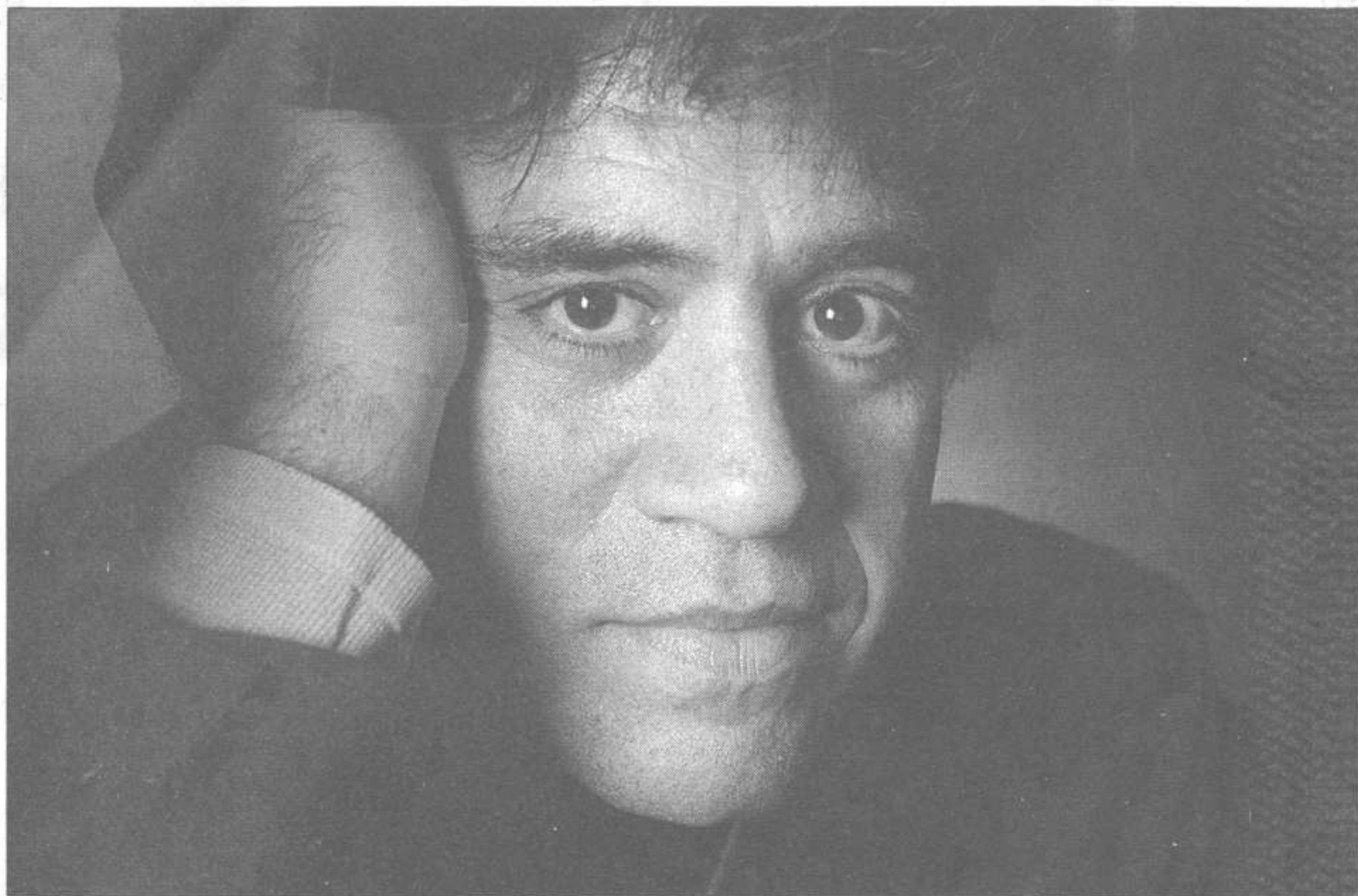
"Then I gave her a profession and problems to go with it," he said. "Later, I added a second layer, her family—her mother and sister, her fear of going crazy like her late aunt, and her desire to return to her roots, like her mother. And in making this film I wanted to go back to my beginnings, to return to my own roots as something that would give me strength."

Consequently, for his film's pivotal section, Almodóvar shot in Almagro in La Mancha, which is only a short distance from Calzada de Calatrava, where Almodóvar was born in 1951.

Leaving home at 16, Almodóvar wound up working 12 years for the National Telephone Co. while working in Super 8, joining a theater group and even a punk rock group, finally breaking through in 1980 with the slight but promising "Pepi, Luci, Bom. . . ."

"Female solitude became the subject of the film," Almodóvar said of his current release, citing the influence of Jean Cocteau's "The Human Voice" and "The Beautiful Indifferent." "She would be a woman who reads and who expresses herself in writing. Much of the film is about communication—and lack of communication—through words. Think of the long monologues of the mother nobody wants to listen to. I also wanted to suggest that in the most painful moments of your life you can create something positive. I had

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PAUL MORSE / Los Angeles Times

"I do have to make a movie in English as part of my education," says Pedro Almodóvar.

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been working a year-and-a-half on something else, but this story imposed itself on me in one week."

At a crucial point in the romance novelist's crisis she meets the paunchy but engaging editor (Jean Echanove) of the arts and culture section of a major Madrid newspaper, for whom she wants to write articles on serious women writers. But he's enchanted to learn her identity because like other intellectuals he's intrigued by the emotional power of kitsch. More important than the possibility of love he offers her friendship. It's not for nothing that in relation to the importance of friendship Almodóvar refers to the final scene of George Cukor's final film, "Rich and Famous." Indeed, "The Flower of My Secret" is much like an elegant Cukor film, as wise as it is witty.

"I miss the Bette Davis movies, the Joan Crawford movies. I'd like to make movies like them without being dated," he said. "I've been offered to make copies of '40s and '50s comedies, but I can't do it. I do have to make a movie in English as part of my education, just as I have to direct a play."

Almodóvar would like to work again with Antonio Banderas,

whose international stardom began with "Law of Desire" and was extended with "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" (1990), one of Almodóvar's kinkiest and most popular romantic comedies.

"I have to admit I miss him," he said. "I've never found a better male messenger for what I have to say. We still have a very good relationship, but if we work together again, it must be in our language. Now that he has a chance to select his movies I hope he'll make better choices. He's more talented than he knows. Consider the intensity of his gaze. I'm not prejudiced, but I can't think of an American actor who can equal that. We always get together when he's in Madrid. I really like him very much. As an actor he was born in my arms."

As for Carmen Maura, with whom he had a falling out after "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," he said sadly, "I don't know if we'll ever work together again. I'm afraid not. I still have personal problems with her. When you have a relationship that lasts a long time"—Maura was in "Pepi, Luci, Bom . . ."—"sometimes the worst as well as the best comes out in people. Sometimes

creative people all have to pay a price. I have to say that Carmen was the best medium for me when we were working together."

Almodóvar explained that in regard to working in Hollywood what was important to him was not power but rather retaining control, and was exceedingly wary about the prospect. "I'm a little scared, yet closer to not resisting Hollywood now," he said. "For the first time I feel that I'd like to direct outside Spain."

"The Flower of My Secret" is playing at selected theaters in Southern California.

'Heaven's Prisoners' Director at Screening

Phil Joanou will be the guest at the American Film Institute's Directors on Directing series tonight. Joanou will be on hand for a discussion after a screening of his upcoming film "Heaven's Prisoners," starring Alec Baldwin and Kelly Lynch. The screening will be at 6:30 p.m. in the Mark Goodson Screening Room at the AFI campus, 2021 N. Western Ave. Information: (213) 856-7690.