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MOVIES

Talk to her about great filmmakers

Considering her parentage, it carries some weight when Geraldine Chaplin calls Pedro Almodóvar 'the greatest director alive.'

By KEVIN THOMAS
Times Staff Writer

GERALDINE Chaplin was as radiant as the sun pouring into her balconied Chateau Marmont suite. She was back in her native territory — she was born in Santa Monica — for the AFI Fest 2002's recent closing-night screening of Pedro Almodóvar's "Talk to Her," in which she has a pivotal role and which she considers his greatest film yet.

With her dark hair in bangs and a pigtail running down her back, a white shirt over black Capri pants, Chaplin, at 58, looked much like the ballet student she once was.

In fact, the slender Chaplin plays a ballet teacher in the film, a choreographer of ballets so fervently topical that her descriptions become comical.

She is, however, a loving mentor to one of the film's principal characters (Leonor Watling), a promising ballerina rendered comatose when she is hit by a car. The teacher's attentiveness ultimately provides a crucial link in the film's complex narrative, and Chaplin captures the appealing humor within the intense personality of the teacher with wit and economy.

"Ballet was my first love, but I wasn't really good at it at all," Chaplin said. "So I didn't see any ballet at all for years. And it is not like riding a bicycle — you do forget how to do it."

Nevertheless, she found acting for Almodóvar a pleasure, although her companion since 1979, cinematographer-turned-painter Patricio Castilla, remarked while Chaplin was off being

photographed, "Pedro asks 150% of his actors — but he gives them 150% back."

"Pedro reminded me of my father. He could make you laugh, then cry and then laugh again," Chaplin said. "He'll do all the parts, he'll show you how to do it. He has a knack of explaining a character to you like a snake putting you under a spell, yet he is open to any kind of suggestions, then takes them and makes them better." As far as she is concerned, "He's the greatest director alive."

One of the most accomplished actresses of her time, Chaplin remains active in television and films, with occasional stage appearances thrown in. She is as comfortable acting in Spanish or French as she in English, which she speaks with a slight mid-Atlantic accent. Film historian David Thomson has gone so far as to assert that he believed he "would give up all of Charlie's work for 'Cria Cuervos' (Raise Ravens), which contains a performance of the utmost rigor and depth from his daughter Geraldine."

Arguably the finest of the films Chaplin made during her long association with Spain's veteran filmmaker Carlos Saura, the 1975 film afforded Chaplin a dual role, playing a dying woman and her daughter as an adult deeply affected by her mother's death. To Thomson, Chaplin has "the natural face of vulnerability; the same resolute stare belonged to Lillian Gish."

She has acted for David Lean, who launched her international career with a role in "Dr. Zhivago," Robert Altman and Alan Rudolph — as well as for outrageous experimental Swiss director Daniel Schmid, among others. Although Chaplin, based in Switzerland near her late parents' home, has spent much of her life and career in Spain, she had never before appeared in an Almodóvar film. "I was buying a newspaper at a kiosk in Madrid when I ran into Pedro, who said, 'Give me your phone number.' Well, it seemed like I waited three months by the phone for a call, and when it came I was sure it was for an invitation to a premiere for one his films,



CHARLIE'S DAUGHTER: "Pedro reminded me of my father. He could make you laugh, then cry and then laugh again," Chaplin says.

RICHARD HARTOG Los Angeles Times

but then I thought, 'Wait a minute, he doesn't have a film coming out!' He asked me if he could send me a script, but I immediately said yes to the part sight unseen."

Starting with "The Flower of My Secret" in 1995, but especially with his last film, "All About My Mother" (1999), critics have found in Almodóvar a new level of maturity, a phrase he will accept while not much caring for it.

Of "Talk to Her," a convoluted tale of the vagaries of love involving a male nurse in love with that comatose ballerina, Chaplin observes that Almodóvar has thrown over his "compulsive need to entertain," and she sees him on a path of spiritual discovery, which to her means "delving into the dark, not the light as New Age types would have it. He understands that we are completely dominated by nature and are confoundingly amoral. But he has so much compassion that there is never a character in his films that he doesn't like himself."

Chaplin is, however, irate that "Talk

to Her" was passed over as Spain's official Oscar entry (in favor of Fernando León de Aranoa's "Mondays in the Sun," starring Javier Bardem as a laid-off shipyard worker). She says she's sure she understands why it happened.

"Spain was a dictatorship for 40 years, and just because you have elections doesn't mean you're a democracy," she said. "There's this mentality that never allows anyone to get too big; it's a fascist way of thinking. And when there's a joyfulness about the artist, as there is about Pedro, who is at the height of his career, well, they just want to keep them down."

What angers Chaplin most is that she perceives the snub as a put-down of Almodóvar for his art. "At least when my father was attacked it was for his politics — even Louella Parsons, that viper, acknowledged that Charlie Chaplin was a great artist."

As for her father's legacy, Chaplin is pleased that his films are going to be released on DVD by Warner Home Video,

"each with lots of extras, including a commentary by a director, Woody Allen among them." She also reports that Marin Karmitz's MK2 Productions has released "The Great Dictator," Chaplin's daring 1940 spoof of Hitler, in France with much success and screened it in Berlin to an enthusiastic audience "not 100 yards from Hitler's bunker." Its DVD release will be accompanied by the documentary "The Dictator and the Tramp" by Kevin Brownlow, responsible for the memorable "Unknown Chaplin" series featuring unseen footage from the director's own vault. Geraldine's sister Josephine oversees the affairs of the Chaplin legacy from Paris, which is home base for sister Victoria's traveling circus.

The eldest of Chaplin's eight children by his third wife, the late Oona O'Neill, daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill, Geraldine admitted she is not close to all her seven siblings but expresses special enthusiasm for sister Annette-Emilie, who with her husband runs a theater company in a converted silo a 45-minute drive from Paris. Meanwhile, her brothers Michael and Eugene live on at their parents' large estate in Vevey, Switzerland, struggling with the government bureaucracy for permission turn it into a museum.

Chaplin's son by Saura, Shane, 28, is a psychologist working at Miami Children's Hospital's emergency room while pursuing his doctorate, and Oona, her 16-year-old daughter by Castilla, is a student at Scotland's prestigious Gordonstoun School.

Chaplin was also featured in another film at the AFI Fest 2002: Antonio Hernandez's intriguingly cryptic family drama, "The City of Lost Souls," in which she is cast opposite Fernando Fernán Gómez, who plays a rich, dying businessman haunted by guilt. Chaplin plays his much younger wife, a steely woman of icy elegance. Gómez is a revered stalwart of the Spanish cinema, with whom Chaplin has acted several times. "He's so funny about acting," she said. "He says, 'I find it the most embarrassing experience in the world. I do it only for the money.'"

Next up for Chaplin is a new version of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" with an ensemble cast that includes Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel, Kathy Bates and F. Murray Abraham among others, for Irish director Mary McGuckian. "It's been so long in the works that I was first cast as the ingénue and then the mother and now the old abbess," she said, chuckling.

"My ideal year is to appear in a great big American super-production, then do one of those marginal French films, then something on TV and then for a first-time director. Sometimes," said Chaplin, "it actually happens."