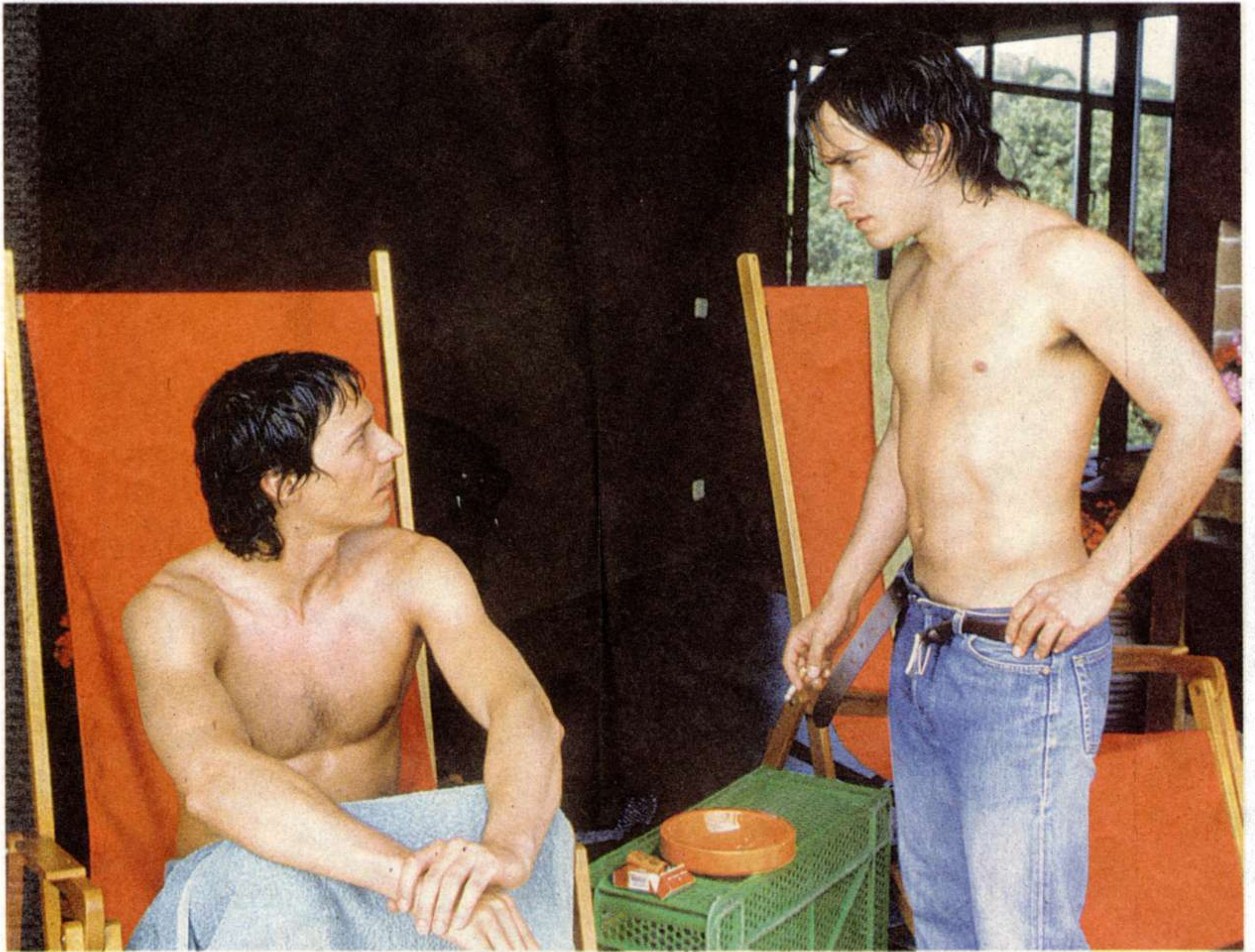


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## MOVIES



Photographs by Sony Pictures Classics

**REUNITED:** Fele Martínez's young director, left, is paid a visit by his old Catholic-school love, played by Gael García Bernal, in "Bad Education."

## REVIEW

# A film schooling

Pedro Almodóvar offers pessimistic insight into Spanish culture in 'Bad Education.' In this chronicle of misbehavior, nearly all are guilty.



Pedro Almodóvar offers pessimistic insight into Spanish culture in 'Bad Education.' In this chronicle of misbehavior, nearly all are guilty.

By CARINA CHOCANO  
Times Staff Writer

**I**F the biggest political act of Pedro Almodóvar's early film career was a refusal to mention the dictatorship that smothered Spain in hypocritical piety for 40 years, "Bad Education" is his latest. Now 53 and as contrarian as ever, Almodóvar finally acknowledges the long shadow of fascism by returning to the era of "La Movida" — the countercultural explosion that followed Franco's death in 1975 — and shrouding it in a smog of paranoia and dread.

Granted, the unofficial slogan of the decade-and-a-half-long party was "Madrid Me Mata" ("Madrid Kills Me"), but even this noirish motto was usually tucked between a pair of exclamation points to better express Spain's new era of rational exuberance.

*¿Que pasó?*

"Bad Education" — a clumsy translation from the Spanish "La Mala Educación," meaning "Bad Manners" or "Misbehavior" — alludes to the sins and schemes of its characters, but their behavior goes far beyond impoliteness. What the title far more accurately describes is the remarkable career of its creator, which has been nothing if not an extended and highly improbable exercise in gleeful, nose-thumbing, anti-bourgeois provocation. With "Bad Education," Almodóvar is at his most breathtakingly complex and mature, and at his most pessimistic.

The film unfolds over three time periods: 1980, the year that "Pepi, Luci, Bom . . ." transformed the director from underground artist-phone company lackey into countercultural superstar; the mid-1960s, which shaped him, thanks to his much-despised Roman Catholic schooling, into the artist he became; and a brief stretch in the late 1970s, when Almodóvar left his small town and hit the big, bad city of his dreams.

Dark and transgressive as Almodóvar's early movies were, they also popped with the primary-colored innocence, optimism and giddy humor of a kid just released from a paternalistic church-state. As soon as he could, he unleashed on the world a parade of the usual bugbears of fascism — gays, addicts, single women involved with married men, single mothers, cross-dressers and spunky nuns with raging heroin habits and names like "Sister Sewer Rat." Needless to say, these were the good guys.

Save for a single boy-martyr, however, "Bad Education" has no good guys. To a man, the characters are irredeemably cynical, cold, deceptive and worse. Almodóvar pays homage to Billy Wilder, borrowing themes and narrative techniques from his caustic masterpiece "Double Indemnity." Almodóvar's characters' identities are film-fed. At one point, hot off a crime, two of them duck into a movie theater advertising "Film Noir Week" and emerge musing, "It's as if the movies talked about us."

So it is. A story about storytelling that constantly calls into question the reliability of its narrators and their motives, "Bad Education" finds Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), a film director in his late 20s, sitting in his office clipping tabloid articles when he's paid an unexpected visit from his long lost childhood love. The last time he saw Ignacio (Gael García Bernal), Enrique was being



**ANGEL?** García Bernal's character has an alternate identity as a vulpine transvestite. The film's duplicitous characters play roles, beneath which are still other roles.

expelled from school by Father Manolo (Daniel Giménez Cacho), an ordained Humberto Humberto wanting to keep Ignacio to himself. But the young man sitting in Enrique's office, who insists on being called by his ill-fitting stage name, Angel, bears little resemblance to the boy Enrique loved at school. Still, Ignacio/Angel has a couple things Enrique wants — a good idea for a movie and pillowy lips — so Enrique keeps his distrust to himself and gets to work on his new film: The incredible true story of two boys in love, the corrupt priest who came between them and the junkie-trannie-writer who eventually blackmails the former priest who molested her as a boy.

Like Enrique's film, "Bad Education" began its life as a short story Almodóvar wrote in the early '70s as revenge on his religious education. But it ends up being about the monstrous transformative effects of vanity, opportunism and unchecked desire. Ultimately, "Bad Education" doesn't let anyone off the hook — not the church, not the spiritually bereft cults of materialism and celebrity, not actors (they're liars), not directors (propagandists), not even his old friends, the scrappy outcasts. Maybe, by excluding them, Almodóvar spares the women he's so often cast as heroes. Then again, he could be suggesting there's just no such thing anymore.

As if getting back at movies by tweaking the conventions they peddle like soggy hot dogs, "Bad Education" — here's a moral — is about learning not to trust. Characters play roles, which they then strip away to reveal other roles. Angel is an epically lethal *femme fatale* — so duplicitous even her gender is a put-on — and, fittingly, García Bernal slips in and out his vulpine transvestite, eager artist and reptilian hustler selves as if they were silky dressing gowns. (The young Mexican actor's chameleonic transformations are made all the more impressive by the fact that he also impersonates a Spaniard throughout. His accent, sadly, is lost in translation, but it's as convincing as his Juliette Lewis pout.)

Father Manolo, once a respected, upstanding secret pervert, sheds his imposing soutane and the church's protection to become the sleazy, cravat-wearing Sr. Berenguer (Lluís Homar), publishing executive and husband. (Another institu-

tion that's not working out for him.) Even the fun-loving city is not itself, but a lonely place where the fun is so forced and pointless that Enrique spends most of his time holed up in a stark suburban bunker. The one time Enrique and Angel hit the town, all we see is their end-of-the-night stumble to the car. Enrique's had several too many, and Angel, whose idea of fun is tied up with money, power and total impunity, looks bored and vaguely repelled by the whole aimless, overly indulgent scene.

It's no accident that the opening credits mix Catholic with cinematic imagery, or that the chapel and the movie theater are equally central to the story. "Bad Education" serves as a general warning about the dangers of seductive narratives of every kind — especially the type used to justify bad behavior.

"We have no witnesses," Father Manolo's thuggish assistant notes at one point, as they contemplate a mortal sin.

"God," the tortured priest replies.

"Yes, but he's on our side."

Enrique may maintain a detached, ironic, even sphinx-like remove until the entirety of Angel's deception is revealed to him, but he's far from innocent. By the time he's aware of the full measure of his own complicity in the ongoing story, the movie's only true victim, uncorrupted innocence, is long gone.

## 'Bad Education'

**MPAA rating:** NC-17 for a scene of explicit sexual content

**Times guidelines:** Nudity, explicit sex acts and scenes of implied pedophilia

**Gael García Bernal**.....Angel  
**Fele Martínez**.....Enrique  
**Javier Cámara**.....Paquito  
**Daniel Giménez-Cacho**.....Father Manolo  
**Lluís Homar**.....Sr. Berenguer

El Deseo, in association with TVE and Canal Plus. A Sony Pictures Classics release. Produced by Agustín Almodóvar. Executive producer Esther García. Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Director of photography José Luis Alcaine, A.E.C. Editing José Salcedo. Composer Alberto Iglesias. Running time 1 hour, 49 minutes. In Spanish with English subtitles. At Laemmle's Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, (323) 848-3500, and Landmark's NuWilshire, 1314 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 281-8223.