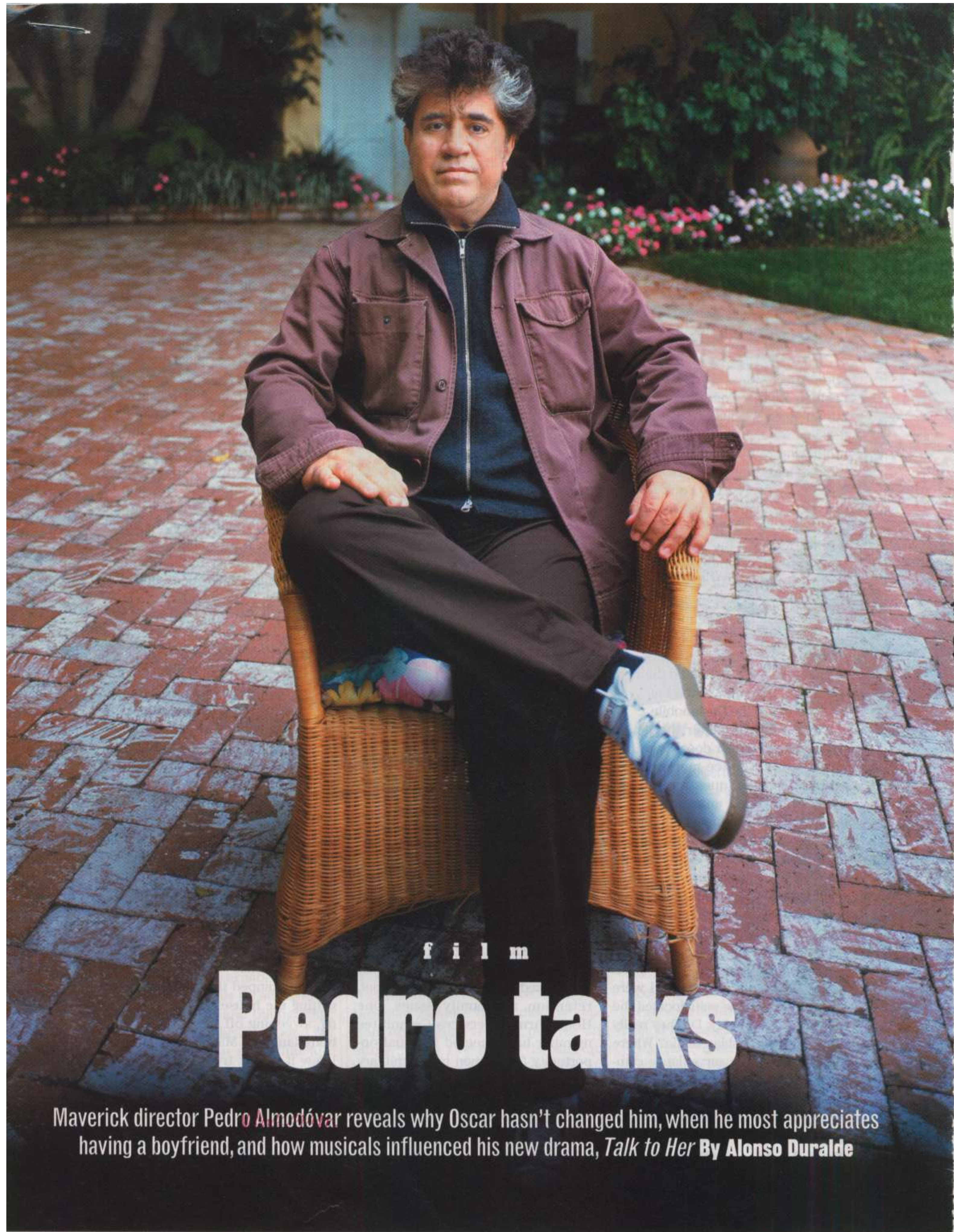


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Pedro talks

Maverick director Pedro Almodóvar reveals why Oscar hasn't changed him, when he most appreciates having a boyfriend, and how musicals influenced his new drama, *Talk to Her* **By Alonso Duralde**

Almodóvar

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"There seems to be the unfortunate idea that once you've won an Oscar, you're supposed to make a big-budget movie, preferably in English, with a lot of big movie stars," says Pedro Almodóvar, explaining the thinking behind his courageous and outrageous new film, *Talk to Her*. "And I think this movie goes to say that you don't have to do that." The new movie also confirms that the legendary gay Spanish filmmaker, now 51, won't be giving up his enfant terrible status any time soon. Relaxing in his favorite Los Angeles bungalow and trying to fight off a cold, Almodóvar speaks enthusiastically in both English and Spanish about his first film after winning the Academy Award for *All About My Mother*.

With this new project, he shakes up expectations not only about what to do after winning an Oscar but also regarding the kind of film his fans predict he'll make. Whereas *All About My Mother* was very much a story about women (with the men in their lives either losing their minds or becoming women themselves), *Talk to Her* is a movie about two men (with the women they love both in comas). "There is this common misconception that I am a 'woman's director,' but I also direct men," says Almodóvar. "After having the success of *All About My Mother*, I needed to become more intimate, smaller than before, to be sure of the terrain that I was walking on. I needed to go back to some little place that I recognized by myself. And that's what this movie is."

Talk to Her tells the story of travel writer Marco (Darío Grandinetti), who forms an unusual friendship with nurse Benigno (Javier Cámara) when their respective girlfriends are comatose in the same hospital. And while it's one of Almodóvar's less conspicuously gay films, he nonetheless revisits such favorite motifs as hospitals ("They're dramatically interesting") and bullfighting ("For the Spanish public, it's a kind of religion"). Almodóvar says that although the film's two protagonists are straight, he feels very close to them. "All the emotions I show in this movie, I've experienced before," he says, specifically noting the scene when Marco begins weeping during a Caetano Veloso performance. "I remember the first time I heard Caetano sing 'Cucurucucú Palo-

ma,' I was moved to tears. It was surprising to me, and that's why it works in the movie. While I'm sometimes embarrassed to be a man who cries, I find it dramatically interesting because a man who cries in a public place is a man of mystery."

Less mysterious is Almodóvar's love of performance, whether it's Veloso's plaintive tune or choreographer Pina

book coming out in Spain titled *Almodóvar for Actors*, featuring excerpts of his scripts for aspiring thespians to use in class or for auditions. He notes, grinning, that many young Spanish actors apparently use a monologue read by Antonio Banderas in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* for tryouts.

It's a little harder to imagine an auditioning actor reciting from *Talk to Her*,



A show of hands

Almodóvar (above, center) directs Cámara (above, left) and Grandinetti; Geraldine Chaplin (near left) teaches dance to a precomatose Leonor Watling.

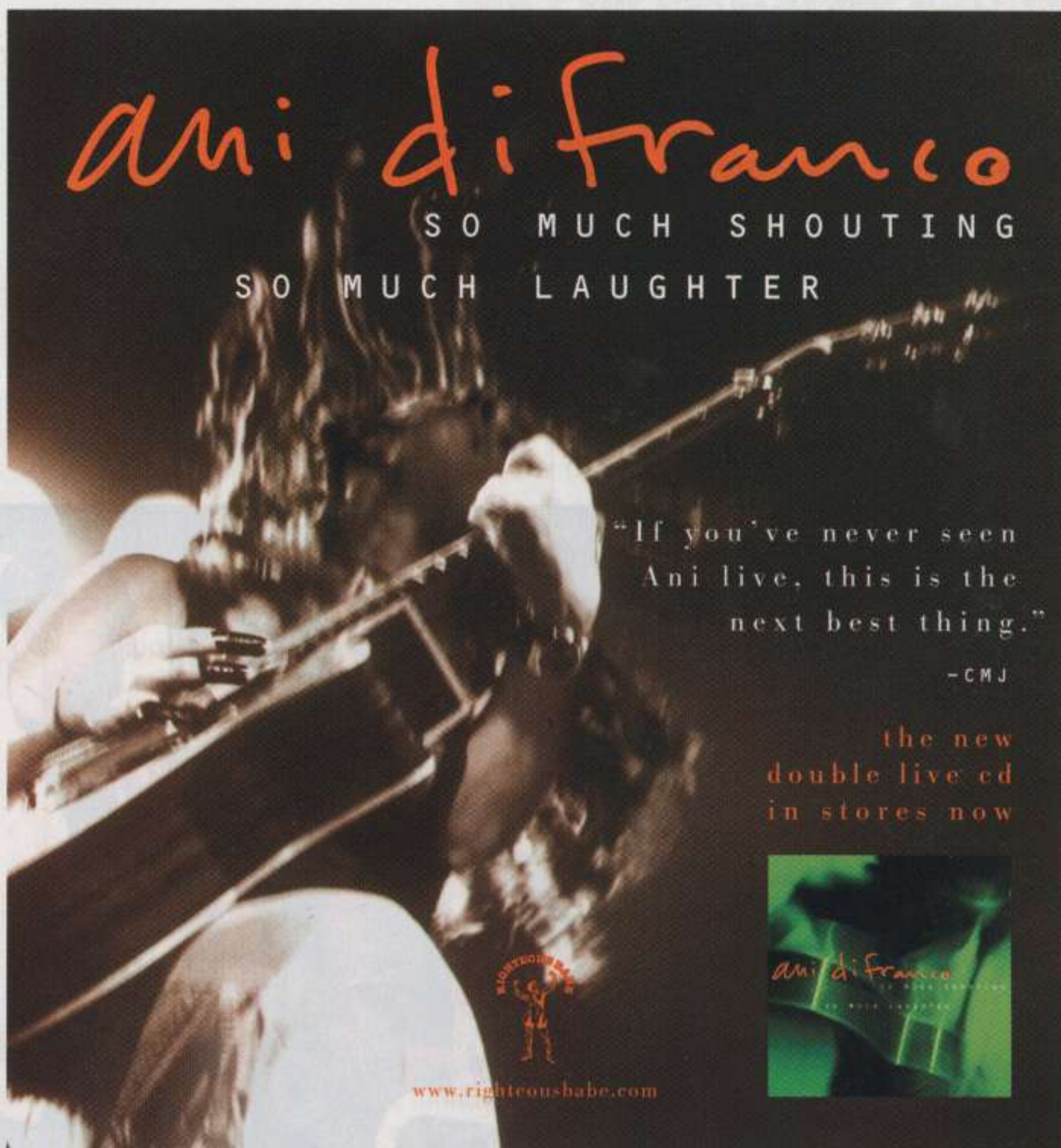
Bausch's modern dance pieces, which bookend the film. "What inspires me to write is my own experience, but my experience includes the books I've read, conversations I've had, movies and stage shows I've seen," the director says. "For me, it's part of my life, and that's why it's part of my characters."

And if Almodóvar loves the stage, the affection is apparently mutual: There is talk of mounting a musical version in Madrid of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (shades of Broadway's *Hairspray*), and he says there's a

partly because the lead performers are so perfect and partly because the entire movie hangs on a very delicate balance between the comic and the repulsive, the romantic and the horrifying. Almodóvar says such balancing acts are what his cultural background is all about: "Spain is a culture where tragedy is almost always at the forefront, much more than comedy. You could almost say we're specialists in tragicomedy. It's not uncommon to find blood, to find death, and at the same time to find humor based in blood and death to make fun of them."

Talk to Her is hardly bloody, although any love story about comatose women is bound to include its fair share of tragedy. The movie also has one of those Almodóvar moments—think Victoria Abril and the scuba tub toy in *Tie Me Up!* or Carmen Maura getting hosed down in ►

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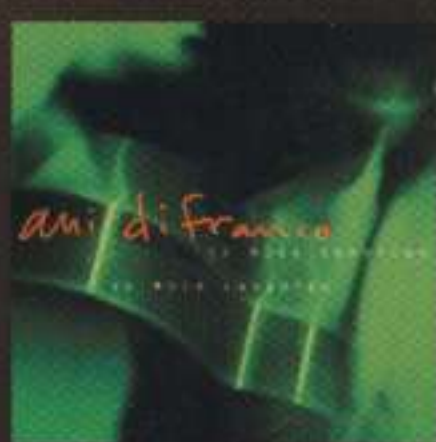


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Law of Desire—that's bound to get audiences talking. (You'll never watch *The Incredible Shrinking Man* the same way again.) "I'm not out to provoke the audience; it's just that I work the same way as I always have," the director says. "I continue on a very personal terrain; it's often very dark, but I don't feel the need to pander to audiences."

One thing that his audiences have wanted to see over the last decade is a reunion between Almodóvar and his original leading lady, Maura. And after a long period of feuding between the two, he says they will probably work together again soon. "I can do it, and I think also she can do it, because we talk about that," he says. "For more than 10 years it was impossible for personal reasons. Even after we became friends again and started talking to each other, it was too difficult for her. But now, in the last few years, we've talked about it, and I'm looking for a character for her."

And while Almodóvar isn't obsessively concerned about how his work plays in the United States, he is worried about the nation's impact on him. "I don't think there's rampant anti-Americanism in Europe," he says. "There's the thought that one very powerful man, the president, is making decisions that affect many other places besides the United States and that many people both abroad and in the U.S. don't agree with him. And now we're all worried because these are very important choices he's making, which will affect all our lives. We're not just concerned about America; we're worried about a number of Arabs and a number of Jews who are sowing terror throughout the world. And Europe's not feeling so secure."

But even if he can't rely on world peace, the director does have someone keeping a light on for him: "There's someone waiting for me in Spain—I think." He declines to offer details about his love except to say, laughing, "It's wonderful to be in love, and it's also necessary. Just to feel that you are important to someone else's life, which has nothing to do with filmmaking or money or anything else. When I arrive in a hotel, no matter which one in which city, I always feel very alone. And it's the same when I return home to Madrid with all my suitcases. At times like that, it's miraculous to have someone to call who isn't your brother." ■

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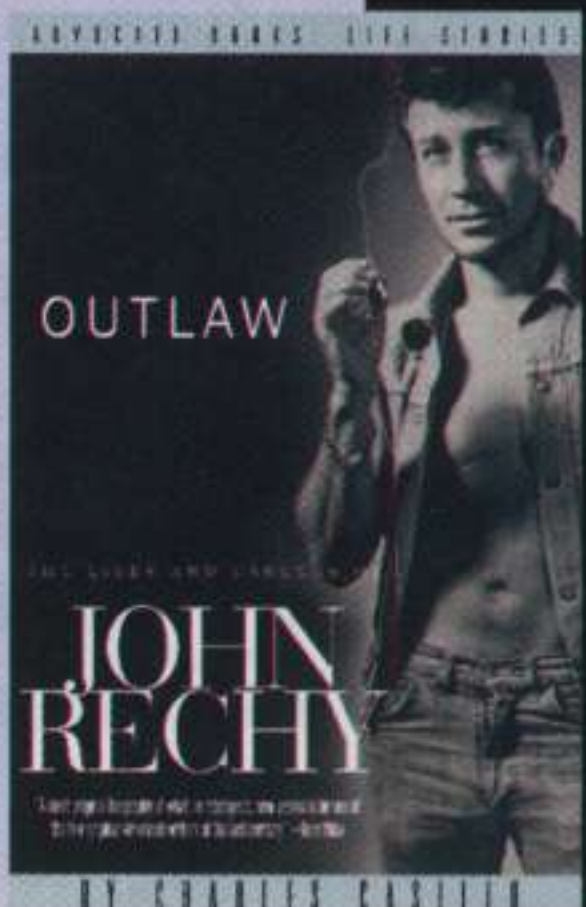
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