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Banderas takes a cue from toreador Martinez in *Matador*.

The Red and the Black

BY AMY TAUBIN

MATADOR. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Written by Almodóvar and Jesus Ferrero. Produced by Andres Vicente Gomez. Released by Cinevista/World Artists. At Cinema Studio, opening September 16.

A child of Buñuel as well as Cocteau, Pedro Almodóvar relishes delirious, eye-gouging openings. Underneath the crimson credits, a man sits masturbating in front of a TV. An elegantly edited medley of slasher-film climaxes—blood congealing on throats, breasts, and bellies, spliced to the rhythms of screams and moans—floods the airwaves.

Cut to the masturbator lecturing to an adoring class of neophyte bullfighters. He is Diego Montes (Nacho Martinez), a former great, who, crippled in the bullring, now teaches in order to support his hundred-acre estate, poisonous mushroom garden, and other expensive tastes. As Diego describes "the art of killing," we see a courtyard where a formidable Helmut Newton-style woman is zeroing in on her prey. A muscular innocent, he follows her to a convenient, chillingly empty apartment. Throwing back her cape to reveal her working clothes—a leather waist cincher—she mounts him efficiently and, just before he comes, stabs him in "the cleft of the clods" (the hollow beneath the nape of the neck) with a stiletto hairpin. He falls back lifeless, and as she milks his last erection, the dulcet sound of Satie is heard.

Although *Matador* offers two or three other noteworthy set-pieces, nothing comes close to these first 10 minutes. The circuitous plot focuses first on Angel (Antonio Banderas), Diego's blood-shy pupil. Angel's eyes are filled with naked bodies. They come to him either by way of a handy telescope or through his gift of clairvoyance—which grows stronger as the solar eclipse approaches. Angel tries to prove himself to his teacher by raping Diego's girlfriend. When she fails to report him (she's as sullenly tolerant of his coming between her thighs as she is of Diego's instructions to "play dead" when he screws her), he goes to the police and confesses not only to rape but to four murders. The lawyer who rushes to his defense is none other than Maria Cardenal (Assumpta Serna)—the black widow of the opening sequence.

Angel is more mediator than hero—he precipitates Diego and Maria's encounter and then pretty much disappears. Almodóvar shifts his attention to the mutual seduction, but since it's clear that Diego and Maria's first fuck must also be their

last, delay is the only possible strategy. When the moment of *jouissance* arrives, it has all the passion of a *Playgirl* spread: Diego, in full regalia, noses his way up Maria's body, a rose between his teeth.

Earlier in their pursuit, Diego and Maria had wandered into a movie theater and stood transfixed before the last scene of *Duel in the Sun*, in which Jennifer Jones claws through the mud toward the expiring Gregory Peck. Dubbed into Spanish, it could have been a sequel to *L'Age d'Or*. Hyperbole is the rock on which Almodóvar builds his films. *Matador*, produced in 1986, was the fifth, and while nothing else he's produced matches its bravura beginning, it's barely enough for a quick hand job by the end. ■