

Still pleased with himself

All About My Mother, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

By David Walsh
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By the time this comment appears, Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar will probably have finished two additional films, explained them with references to a dozen other works and associated himself with several more filmmakers of the past. This is what Almodóvar does. He makes clever films and provides clever explanations, which somehow always manage to put him in the best possible light and advance his career. He is a national treasure. While there are no doubt Francoist dinosaurs who look upon him with distaste, those more astute in the establishment recognize a gold mine when they see one. Almodóvar has single-handedly put contemporary Spanish cinema on the map!

Manuela in *All About My Mother* sees her son, running in the rain after an autograph, struck and killed by a car in Madrid in the first few minutes of the film. She travels to Barcelona in search of the boy's father, now a transvestite named Lola. Before she finds the latter Manuela comes across one of her former pals, a transvestite prostitute named Agrado. And two actresses, Huma and Nina, starring in a production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Manuela even fills in one night as Stella). And a pregnant nun, Sister Rosa, who turns out to be HIV positive. After losing one son, Manuela ends up with another.

Almodóvar says that he started out to make a film about non-actors who have nonetheless “the capacity to act.” More concretely, it became a film about the ability of women “to play-act, to fake.” He writes that from his childhood he remembers how “the women faked, lied, hid, and that way allowed life to flow and develop, without men finding out or obstructing it.”

The title makes reference to Joseph L. Mankiewicz' *All About Eve* (1950), about a young actress who

schemes her way to success. Almodóvar dedicates his film to Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night*, Bette Davis in Mankiewicz' film and Romy Schneider in *L'important c'est d'aimer*. In his notes he refers to twenty-one other films in which actresses played actresses.

Manuela's ill-fated son wants to be a writer. He has his mother read to him from the preface to Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons*: “When God hands you a gift, he also hands you a whip; and the whip is intended solely for self-flagellation.”

One afternoon or evening Agrado, now working for the actress Huma, is forced to announce to the theater audience that the performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* will have to be canceled (Nina, one of its stars, is strung out on drugs). She offers to tell her life history instead to those who choose to remain. In her monologue she details her various surgeries and their respective costs. She concludes: “It cost me a lot to be authentic. But we must not be cheap in regards to the way we look. Because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself.”

So all the ingredients are here: film and literary references galore, considerations of art, artifice, authenticity and “what is to be a woman,” melodrama, the AIDS crisis. One must say, in Almodóvar's defense, that he is not stingy. An audience gets its money's worth.

Why then is it all so forgettable? Viewing *All About My Mother* is like eating cotton candy, it dissolves unsatisfyingly as one consumes it.

Like many contemporary filmmakers, Almodóvar is not prepared to commit himself body and soul in a way that would make his drama convincing. We are supposed to take on faith too many of the critical elements. Young Esteban dies in the first few moments

of the film. In a sense, everything depends on the spectator's involvement in his death and the sequence of events it sets off. But he's very little to us—a face, a few words, a diary entry. It's not enough to go on. His mother's pain seems real, but the tragedy remains at a distance.

This is a recurring problem. The announcement by Sister Rosa that she's HIV positive makes almost no impression. There's nothing convincing about this scene or the ones involving her that follow. And the appearance of Lola toward the end, who's dying from AIDS, should have something grandiose and tragic about it. Again it falls flat. Almodóvar introduces these emotionally charged elements and apparently expects the viewer to summon up the appropriate feelings. But it's the artist's job to make that possible. I felt that I was continually being manipulated, being directed to find this or that moment "moving," another one "tragic" and so on, without the filmmaker having provided the depth and complexity that allows one *spontaneously* to feel something.

The themes and motifs that Almodóvar introduces or touches upon, in other hands—Oscar Wilde, R.W. Fassbinder, etc.—have a subversive content. To Wilde the artificial was virtually synonymous with the critical spirit. Life was a failure from the artistic point of view, it had to be remade. Fassbinder introduced melodrama to criticize the ways in which oppressive social relations were internalized, reinforced in everyday life and made the basis for further oppression.

Almodóvar gives no impression of being dissatisfied with the way things are. At no point does one feel that the director grasps or even has an intuition that the various behaviors and states of mind in the film are socially manipulated in any fashion or the product of distorted and destructive circumstances. The insight that there are all sorts of mothers—biological, self-created, accidental—and all sorts of “women” seems a limited one to me. And how does Agrado's comment, amusing as her performance may be, that “a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself” distinguish itself from the sort of banality one hears on daytime talk shows?

Because everything here curls around and works back on itself to create the impression that somehow life can be made bearable in its existing framework. If only there were tolerance of difference, if only maturity and

rationality were not the exclusive property of some and excess and ecstasy the property of others, if only Barcelona could lend more of its color to life, if only.... Meanwhile the filmmaker leads a pleasant life, with a few complaints, and goes from success to success.

In the past, we were told by one commentator, that Almodóvar's “postmodern style reflects the spirit of these youths, known as *pasotas*, or ‘those who couldn't care less.’” Now he's made a serious film, a mature film? No, now he wants to be *thought* to have made a serious film, a mature film. Why is that difference, a crucial one, so difficult to perceive? There are numerous filmmakers possessing differing degrees of aesthetic respectability—Takeshi Kitano, Olivier Assayas, Wong Kar-wai, Atom Egoyan, Jim Jarmusch and others—who have careers primarily because viewers confuse or can be led to confuse *feeling something* with *playing at feeling it*.

This problem, which looms fairly large at the moment, must have something to do with the stagnation, the unclarity and, frankly, the corruption that pervades so much of the international cultural milieu. Artists are largely at sea, producing work whose primary purpose all too often seems to be making possible the production of the next work. Generally missing is a means of determining the objective purpose and value of creative work, and such a means must have something to do with the notion, once relatively common, that genuinely artistic effort registers a protest, in one form or another, against reality. Everything else is simply bits of colored light or blobs of paint or splotches of ink.

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