



# MAD ABOUT THE BOY

## Why We Love Pedro Almodóvar

WORDS BY RACHAEL SCOTT

Pedro Almodóvar once said, "Women inspire me to write comedies, and men, tragedies". His new film, *The Skin I Live In*, reunites the director with Antonio Banderas for the first time in twenty-one years and definitely falls into the latter category. Banderas plays a deranged plastic surgeon, who runs rampant with a scalpel, enacting revenge for his daughter's rape and then develops a fire and disease resistant skin.

*The Skin I Live In* slots perfectly into Almodóvar's catalogue of bad taste deliciousness that somehow always makes the preposterous plausible and the unpalatable desirable. He confidently choreographs amphetamine-fuelled plots with recurring melodramatic themes of family, identity, sexuality and desire, infusing them with impudent humour, compassion for the outsider and a flamenco aesthetic. You never leave one of his films wondering what someone else might have done with the material because his instantly recognisable films have become a genre in their own right – Almodóvarian.

The 61-year old writer-director from La Mancha, Spain enjoys national treasure status at home and awards recognition worldwide. Much of his work features in the top 100 list of highest grossing foreign language films and 1999's Oscar winner *All About My Mother* saw a new style emerge. A toning down of the high-octane soap operas with hysterical titles (*Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown*, *What Have I Done To Deserve This?*) became evident. The enfant terrible had abandoned the kitsch for the predominantly female concerns of motherhood and family. But one way or another, his fragile femmes continued on the road to meltdown, they just made less of a song and dance about it on the way. His provocative eye remains fixed on such popcorn-inappropriate subjects as prostitution, rape, nymphomania and incest, but his heroines, invariably the victims of these crimes, possess an indomitable resilience to their plight thanks to female solidarity – the DNA coursing through his work. >

In the 1960s, Almodóvar moved to Madrid to pursue a film career and fell in love with iconic drama queens of the Golden Age of Cinema, such as Sophia Loren, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis (*All About Eve* heavily influenced *All About My Mother*). His camera has adored women ever since.

Under the close examination of his lens, Elena Anaya, who plays the woman Banderas' plastic surgeon uses as a guinea pig for a new type of skin, couldn't look more radiant than if Botticelli had painted her portrait. One could argue that women blessed with the beauty of Anaya or Penelope Cruz will never be considered unattractive, but under his gaze they possess an almost otherworldly loveliness. Almodóvar repeatedly works with the same actresses, refusing to trade them in for newer models once they reach the age of forty. 65-year old Marisa Paredes acted in 1984's *Dark Habits* and will be the star of his next film, a biopic of Italian pop star Mina. In the early part of his career, he repeatedly cast striking actress Rossy de Palma, a woman few would consider traditionally beautiful due to her unusually large nose. She went on to become a gay icon, a darling of the fashion world and launched her own perfume.

Almodóvar has nurtured the careers of many future stars, most notably that of Cruz, but his first leading lady was Carmen Maura. They made six features together before he wrote his



ANTONIO BANDERAS AND ELENA ANAYA IN *THE SKIN I LIVE IN*

breakthrough hit *Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown* for her. Then they fell out shortly afterwards, but were reunited eighteen years later on *Volver*.

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Victoria Abril was his next muse, memorably starring in the controversial *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* opposite Banderas, whose crazed fan holds Abril's soft-core porn

star captive until she falls in love with him. Once again, subversive seduction wins out and, despite ourselves, we're left submitting to the story's sexual and romantic allure. *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* had the same effect on a 13-year old Penelope Cruz who decided she wanted to become an actress after sneaking into a cinema to watch it. "I became an actor so that one day I might have the opportunity to work with him", she told an audience at the National Film Theatre in 2006. Their friendship was forged in 1997 during the filming of *Live Flesh* where Almodóvar cast her as a teenage prostitute who gives birth on a bus. Cruz was on screen for all of eight minutes, but landed a more significant role in *All About My Mother* and then *Volver*, earning her an Oscar nomination. Talking to Paul Thomas Anderson about *Broken Embraces*, Almodóvar said: "I do have that feeling that we've formed a kind of marriage." The performances he draws from his 'office wife' are unquestionably some of her finest and Cruz is one of the few European actresses with a foot firmly wedged in Hollywood's revolving door.

The openly gay director, who has always steered his own private life away from press scrutiny, says he feels more comfortable in the female universe. There's no other director who comes close to championing women's stories on screen; female characters have remained products of an exclusively male psyche leaving women reliant on men to portray their lives, loves and desires on screen. Thankfully there is one man who gets it right, and that's why we love Pedro so much. \*

*The Skin I Live In* opens in cinemas August 26th.



THE EVER COOL ALMODÓVAR IN HIS STAPLE SHADES