

# Free spirit

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

Spanish director Alejandro Amenábar's *The Sea Inside* is a triumph-of-the-spirit picture with an unconventional premise: the hero, Ramón Sampedro (played by Javier Bardem), a quadriplegic for two decades as the result of a diving accident, is seeking the right to end his life. *The Sea Inside* is also a social-problem film with a strong and clearly stated point of view: that in Spain, where church and state are historically intertwined, the legal grounds for considering a case like Sampedro's are unfairly determined by Catholic morality.

Set in the late 1980s, the film, based on a true story, chronicles Sampedro's unsuccessful effort to petition the court to allow him to end his life, and his decision to ignore its finding. The screenplay by Amenábar and Mateo Gil provides two noteworthy moral opponents to Sampedro's stance. One is the generous-hearted brother (Celso Bugallo) in whose house Ramón resides. He is the only member of the family who hasn't been swayed to Ramon's perspective. The loving battle between these two men provides one of the movie's most stirring sequences.

The other opponent, a local factory worker and DJ named Rosa (Lola Dueñas), visits Ramón to persuade him that life is worth living, finds in him a confidant for her own troubles, and falls in love with him.

Her opposite number is Julia (Belén Rueda), the lawyer who volunteers to take his case. She is a beauty afflicted with a degenerative disease who wins Sampedro's heart. Initially she agrees not only to help him die but to die with him. But she changes her mind. When we see her for the last time, her illness has advanced to the point she no longer remembers who he is. It's Rosa who, despite her staunch pro-life position, finally offers to assist Ramón's suicide.

The movie isn't manipulative; it's an honest piece of work that refuses to romanticize Sampedro or his journey toward death. What makes it a triumph-of-the-spirit film is not just that Ramón hasn't resigned himself to living out his life chained to a bed, but that his lively and irrepressible imagination has devised methods for communicating with his relatives in other parts of the house and, eventually, for

writing poetry.

Amenábar's previous film was the evocative ghost story *The Others*, and he brings the same extraordinary lyricism to this project, bursting the bounds of his protagonist's tiny, enclosed world by visualizing the leaps of thought that carry him, in his mind, through his bedroom window to the Galician seaside below. In one scene, he envisions himself meeting Julia on the beach—in his mind she is without the ominous crutch that signals her own disability—and making love to her.

The movie has an impeccable ensemble that also includes Mabel Rivera as Sampedro's sister-in-law (his chief caregiver). But it is Bardem who galvanizes the film in the same way that Daniel Day-Lewis's portrayal of Christy Brown pulses at the center of *My Left Foot*. Bardem, a magnificent actor who never repeats himself, works against his character's limitations by making his wit and charisma and not his physicality the focus of the performance. He's also a devastatingly handsome screen presence.

Amenábar's one concession to the romanticism of movies is in not showing us how two decades of quadriplegia take a toll on the body. It's a forgivable fiction, not only because *The Sea Inside* is a work of film poetry but also because Bardem's looks underscore the tragic irony of Sampedro's situation—the discrepancy between his physiological confinement and the spirit it can't restrain, which soars from his bed every day to return to the sea he adores. We look at Bardem and see the beauty of that spirit.