

# Masterful melodrama

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Pedro Almodovar, the one-time *enfant terrible* of the Spanish cinema, has matured into one of the most sublime voices on the international film scene, and in the process has become a great moralist. Who could have expected this from the director of such cult films as *Dark Habits* (1983), which features a heroin-addicted lesbian Mother Superior, or *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989), about a mental patient's sado-masochistic relationship with a porn star?

Almodovar, 51, has always welcomed the fringe of society into his films, especially transvestites, transsexuals and others with a multifaceted sex life. (Almodovar is openly gay.) But after years of placing these rebels in black comedies or over-the-top sex farces, he began to work them into more subdued fare, such as *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), about a middle-aged female journalist facing a potential breakdown as she confronts marital problems with her soldier husband. Almodovar maintained the same serious posture in *Live Flesh* (1997), which is about a lonely man who falls in love with a crippled policeman's wife. The world took notice of his thematic change of heart when *All About My Mother* (1999) won an Oscar for best foreign film. It portrays the complex relationship between a vain actress and a woman whose son was killed while seeking the actress's autograph.

The strange but wonderful *Talk to Her (Habla con Ella)*, Almodovar's fourth superior film in a row, does with male characters what *All About My Mother* does with women. It focuses on a series of relationships revolving around four main characters: Benigno, a chubby male nurse at a private rehabilitation clinic who has gained bedside experience caring for his ailing mother; Marco, a sensitive journalist and travel writer who is still recovering from a failed love affair with a young drug addict; Lydia, an insecure bullfighter who has grown weary of living in the shadow of her better-known toreador boyfriend; and Alicia, a shy former ballet student who is in a coma after a car accident.

Benigno loves Alicia, whose limp but still beautiful body he bathes and cares for each day. Marco is falling in love with Lydia, who arrives at the clinic after being

gored by a bull. Benigno and Marco get to know each other at the clinic and become close friends. Almodovar fashions a fractured narrative, filled with flashbacks, fantasies and dream sequences, to explain the motivations of his wounded protagonists.

Like two other previous giants of the Spanish cinema--Luis Buñuel and Carlos Saura--Almodovar is growing more patient with his characters as he grows older. He accepts and appreciates his characters' flaws even as he points them out. Along the way, he seems to be pointing toward the morally right path--though not in an obvious or didactic manner--showing that we all must rely, at one time or another, on the "kindness of strangers." (Almodovar is a big fan of Tennessee Williams.)

What is fascinating about Almodovar is the way he addresses moral questions--including the nature of voyeurism, marital jealousy and the netherworld of sexual violation--through melodrama. This style, which epitomized Hollywood in the late 1940s and 1950s, is summed up best in the work of Douglas Sirk (an unabashed moralist) in such films as *Written on the Wind* and *All That Heaven Allows*. It's a fascinating coincidence that in the same year that Almodovar's melodramatic style reached mainstream cinema (he has been nominated for an Academy Award as best director), American director Todd Haynes came out with the eye-opening *Far From Heaven*, an explicit homage to Sirk.

What's melodramatic about *Talk to Her*? Consider that it contains not one but two crippling accidents, an unexplained pregnancy, a sudden suicide, six different love stories, two different love triangles, a black-and-white silent film sequence about romantic love, and a miraculous resurrection that can be credited only to the healing power of love. It is testimony to Almodovar's skill as a filmmaker that we focus less on the bizarre elements of his film than on the larger issues that surround it. His approach allows him the time to explore issues of friendship, passion and loneliness. Or as one character says, with true melodramatic sweep, "There's nothing worse than leaving someone you still love."

As a boy, Almodovar studied with the Salesian Fathers of the Franciscans, and he later claimed they "only taught me to lose my faith in God." With a compassion that matches his ability as a stylist, Almodovar seems at least to be finding faith in humanity.