Pedro Almodóvar’s 13th feature film, regarded by many as his first mature masterpiece, garnered more awards than any film in Spanish film history, and was only the third nominee from Spain to receive the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (after José Luis Garci’s VOLVER A EMPEZAR and Fernando Trueba’s BELLE ÉPOQUE). The two main themes of the film—motherhood and acting—are reflected in the film’s dedication:

“To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider… To all the actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to the men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother.”

THE CAST: This “screwball drama” focuses on the friendship of four extraordinary women, each portrayed by an extraordinary actress. Argentine Cecilia Roth has appeared in seven Almodóvar films to date, from his feature debut (PEPI, LUCI, BOM…, 1980) through his most recent offering (I’M SO EXCITED, 2013). Her role here as the grief-stricken Manuela came as a surprise to early Almodóvar fans who knew her best as the nymphomaniac pop star Sexilia in 1982’s LABYRINTH OF PASSION. As wayward nun Sister Rosa, Penélope Cruz takes on her second of five Almodóvar roles. She would later achieve her greatest acclaim for her work as Raimunda in his 2006 VOLVER. Marisa Paredes, with six Almodóvar credits, here plays multiple iconic and intersecting theatrical roles: the actress Huma Rojo, the character Blanche DuBois, and mournful women from Lorca’s YERMA and BODAS DE SAN-GRE. This versatility served her well as President of the Spanish Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from 2000 to 2003. In her one and only Almodóvar role to date, Antonia San Juan steals the show (even commandeering the stage at one point to tell her life story) in her role as the transsexual prostitute Agrado. An audience favorite, San Juan drew from her extensive career in cabaret and stand-up comedy to bring a touch of lightness to the film.

THE LOCATIONS: Almodóvar was a key figure in La Movida Madrileña, and all of his early films were focused on Madrid. He leaves the city for the first time with ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER, going first to La Coruña in Galicia and then to Barcelona, where Manuela’s sagrada familia is formed. By expanding his vision to cover Spain from coast to coast, Almodóvar suggests that Manuela’s healing—like that of Spain itself—requires an embrace of the country as a whole. Though Affonso Beato’s masterful cinematography may fool you, Madrid does occasionally double for Barcelona in the film. One example is the famous el campo cruising scene, though Almodóvar chose to bring in “more vibrant” Catalan prostitutes to work as extras.

Despite its geographic sweep and Beato’s celebration of the beauty of Barcelona, the heart of the film lies in its private spaces, enhanced by Antxón Gómez’s art direction. In a film so concerned with female performances, Almodóvar favors those locales in which the women are liberated from a need to perform. In his theater, the real action always takes place backstage.

“The dressing room for me is like a center of the female universe. I very much like to see the actresses when they are making up or getting dressed. It’s very intimate. They talk. It seems to me that women can’t lie in a dressing room or in the toilet or in the kitchen. These are spaces in which you can only say the truth.” —Almodóvar


NEXT UP: TAKE AUGUST OFF AND JOIN US WHEN WE RETURN IN SEPTEMBER WITH A FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE CLASSIC NOTHING BUT A MAN (1964), WITH DIRECTOR MICHAEL ROEPPER IN PERSON, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 AT 7:00 P.M.