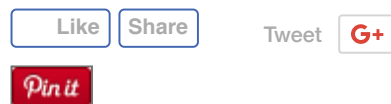




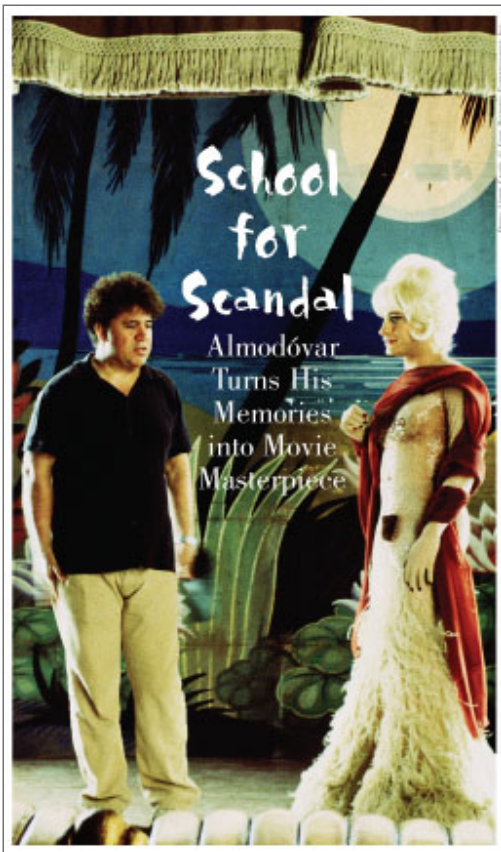
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## School for Scandal

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Nov 17, 2004



### Features



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The setting: a lunch for Pedro Almodóvar at the Carlton Hotel this May in Cannes. The auteur is recognizable by the dark, silver-spiked hair that lengthens his long head, and the red, black and white tie and shirt that match the opening credits of his new film, and he's sopping up the attention like oxygen. Suddenly--presto!--the crush of writers around him vanishes. They've rushed off to Michael Moore's press conference. Such is the attention span of journalists smelling another hot story.

Almodóvar looks unfazed. Pumped up as ever, he regales us loyal few with his views on the Spanish Right (bad) and Zapatero, the new Prime Minister of Spain (good), his translator hanging over his shoulder as if they were joined at the brain.

Arguably Europe's leading film director, Almodóvar seems unstoppable. His *Bad Education* opened Cannes this year--not only the first Spanish film to do so (Almodóvar last graced the Croisette with *All About My Mother*), it's an auteurist work that countered the trend of leading with commerce-driven trifles. *Education* also made the cut as

centerpiece of the New York Film Festival. And the director is brimming with plans for a new film produced by El Deseo, his production company in Madrid.

Bad Education extends the strain of Almodóvar's more serious adult work, bringing to the issue of child abuse in a Catholic school a formal dexterity that marks a kind of summation of his art to date. Embroidering on his signature themes of artifice and reality, sex and death, the filmmaker has created an autobiographical film noir, complete with a femme fatale played by Gael Garcia Bernal in drag.

Bad Education concerns two friends--and first loves--who endured sexual abuse in their Catholic school, an event that has shaped their lives as adults. Weaving back and forth from haunting school-day scenes to the '70s and '80s, the film follows Enrique Goded (Fele Martinez), a young gay filmmaker who's visited by old schoolmate Ignacio (Bernal), who urges him to film a short story he's written about their defining childhood experience. As boys, they were separated by Father Manolo, a jealous priest, who wanted Ignacio for himself and had his rival expelled. As in other Almodramas, however, the characters are not what they seem, and 'Ignacio' is actually Juan masquerading as his older brother.

The Sony Pictures Classics release, opening on Nov. 19, is marvelously constructed as a set of stories nesting within stories, like a set of Russian dolls, with 'reality' dizzyingly depicted by Ignacio's script, Enrique's filmed version, and the conflicting memories of various characters. Only by a directorial sleight of hand does the film's fractured narrative maintain its unity.

Besides the Carlton, Film Journal International caught up with Almodóvar at his post-screening press conference in the Palais, and other venues around Cannes, where he expounded on Spanish-style Catholicism, American film noir, and living dangerously.

Film Journal International: How do you feel about Bad Education opening Cannes?

Pedro Almodóvar: I feel vertigo based on emotion--but also based on the box-office success in Spain. I'm not in competition here, but opening the festival is already a prize. I see myself as the puppet master in a great theatre, who is about to draw back the curtain and show the festival's hundred different emotions.

FJI: What was the genesis of the film?

PA: I had to make Bad Education and get it out of my system before it became an obsession. I had worked repeatedly on the script for over ten years and I could have gone on like that for another decade. Because of the number of possible permutations, the story was only finished once the film had been shot, edited and mixed.

FJI: How is Bad Education different from your previous films?

PA: The big change in this film from All About My Mother and Talk to Her is that it centers on a

universe of men. Ignacio, a singer in the children's choir with a beautiful voice, is abused in his parochial school during the Franco period, and under the movida [post-Franco liberation] became a transvestite drug addict and crook.

FJI: You, too, were a soloist in the children's choir in parochial school. Is this film autobiographical?

PA: It's been said that "everything that isn't autobiographical is plagiarism." All my films are very personal--though not always direct reflections of myself. And one thing I don't do is have a sexual relationship with the people I'm working with. That would destroy the natural authority of the director. In the film, this is not the case: Enrique has an affair with Ignacio/Juan.

The way the story is told is personal. And I've witnessed these events and settings--a Catholic school at the start of the 1970s, and freedom in Madrid, the movida, in the '90s. I made the film 20 years after the events of the film, when I could stand back from them. It represents me in a fundamental way, but not the precise facts of my personal life. Let's say I'm behind those characters, but I'm not telling my life story.

FJI: Is the film anticlerical?

PA: It's not necessary to be anticlerical. The church is destroying itself. In Spain it's its own worst enemy. Nor am I settling scores with the priests who "bad-educated" me. What I show is the fascination I felt for Catholic liturgy. As a child, I'd already lost my faith in God. But I believed in those ceremonies. In this film I've taken over the liturgy as a writer. The characters feed on it, like vampires, creating their own relationships through liturgy.

I use the church as a decorative element. Catholicism in Spain is a religion based on idolatry, almost pagan, with a belief in saints, etc. It's a very profane relationship with religion and that's a good thing.

FJI: What's your attraction to film noir?

PA: It's a very adult genre. In Spain, however, there's no such tradition, while in France there are magnificent examples of the genre. In noir you can turn the worst aspects of humans into spectacle. And the worst attracts me.

In the American films I like, evil is found in the very hearts of the characters. My films are not necessarily about criminals--rather, evil is the result of human relationships, though murder does occur. I think of *Bad Education* as a film noir with the femme fatale part played by Gael Garcia Bernal in drag, who's also an enfant terrible. He strictly follows the examples of Barbara Stanwyck,

Jane Greer, Gene Tierney, Veronica Lake and so many other curses in the shape of a woman.

FJI: Why did you cast Gael Garcia Bernal [who also plays no fewer than three roles] as your lead character?

PA: The part should be played by someone beautiful and innocent-looking, like Gael, who's attractive both as a boy and girl. The character is like Patricia Highsmith's characters, a Mr. Ripley--their crimes ennoble them and make them more beautiful. Gael's character feels love only for his mother, but uses that as an excuse to kill his brother.

FJI: Rumors have it that your working relationship with Gael got pretty rocky.

PA: It was a challenge, for him and for me. It's not easy to play a character that is actually three characters, especially when two of them are very different.

FJI: How would you describe the structure of Bad Education?

PA: The narrative reflects itself and revolves around various visits. It's the story of a triple triangle (the two pupils and the priest), multiple stories that are hidden inside one another and are really only one.

FJI: What are the film's themes?

PA: The main theme is risk: These are characters who live dangerously. Ignacio takes risks with drugs and operations to change his body.

Another subject is priests and the religious education I received based on fear of punishment and guilt. The priest commits sexual abuse, but he loves the child--that's living dangerously for him, he can't stop himself.

And yet another theme is vengeance and settling scores with the priest. The scene with the most perversity is when the other priests give the child to Father Manolo and make him sing a familiar song with suggestive words. Later, Ignacio takes revenge when he writes the story of his past in Grand Guignol style, and Enrique makes the film.

FJI: Two of your characters are brothers, and you seem fascinated by the theme.

PA: I adore the feeling of fraternity--it's love, friendship, plus consanguinity. I'm moved by all of Alain Delon's brothers in Rocco and His Brothers, even Michael and LaToya Jackson, deformed mirrors of each other. And I loved the sisters in Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?, played by Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.

FJI: Would you say you've achieved a new maturity?

PA: Well, that's obvious if you look at me. Though I haven't matured with regard to death. I'm still very scared of it and I still don't understand it and accept it. However, it's when you're really grown up that you can look at what you were before. Bad Education would have been impossible without the other 14 films.

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