



BIG GAY FOLLOWING

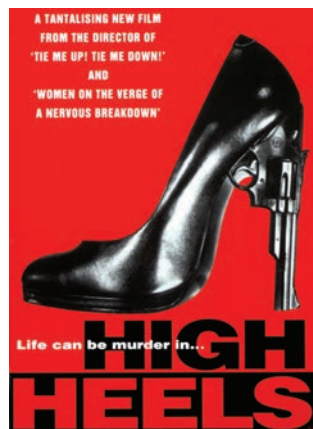
PEDRO

One of the world's most successful and distinctive film directors is back with one of his campiest films to date. With a UK exclusive interview, *Attitude* meets the Spanish genius



ALMODÓVAR





LEFT
Posters for *High Heels*
(1991) and *All About*
My Mother (1999)

SINCE LAUNCHING HIS career in the late 70s, Spain's most celebrated film-maker, Pedro Almodóvar, has always treated the sexual predilections and passions of his characters with an unjudgmental eye. Whether gay, straight, bisexual, transsexual, porn star or kidnapper, they meet and fall in love in any and all combinations. He has also fiercely resisted stereotyping, and, in that sense, his new film, the frothy airborne comedy *I'm So Excited!*, is a departure. Its trio of trolley-dolly protagonists – Joserra, Ulloa and Fajas – are the most flamboyant gay men ever to have minced through an Almodóvar movie. When a technical failure aboard threatens their Peninsula Airways flight, this chatty trio drug the economy class passengers and turn the business-class cabin and pilots' cockpit into a hedonistic den of tequila-swilling, drug-taking, orgiastic sex and choreographed dance routines.

If only *Attitude's* flight to Madrid to meet Almodóvar had been this much fun. The headquarters of his production company, El Deseo, occupies a five-storey building in the city's swish Salamanca district and is decorated with jumbo-sized posters from his films (*Volver*, *All About My Mother*, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*).

We happen to meet the same day that Margaret Thatcher died, although Almodóvar is far more concerned by the same-day passing of one of his beloved icons, the Spanish singer-actress Sara Montiel. 'I'm very sorry for Sara Montiel but in my heart there is no place for Margaret Thatcher,' he says. 'She was a very bad example for some of the Spanish politicians that are now in power.' Having grown up in Franco's shadow, Almodóvar laments the fact that the spirit of La Movida, the Madrid-based flowering of cultural and sexual liberation that exploded in the Spanish dictator's wake, is growing ever more distant. 'When I think of those years it seems like some sort of mirage. But I don't want to be pessimistic.'

While *I'm So Excited!* references Spain's economic crisis, Almodóvar wants it to be embraced as he intended: a giddy escapist comedy. Rebottling the screwball spirit of 80s comedies such as *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, the film feels like an exuberant love letter to the fans who have long adored him for embracing transgressive themes. While Almodóvar has always endeared himself to gay moviegoers, he's also guarded his private life with ferocity. The temptation is there to ask him whether the younger man accompanying him from the hospital is his current partner. But when he recounts a story about snapping one journalist's head off after he had dared pose such an impudent query, that temptation is best resisted.

Nonetheless, Almodóvar, who has often appeared reluctant to discuss his sexuality in print, is more than happy to do so with *Attitude*, speaking with lively exuberance about *I'm So Excited!*, his early years in Madrid and his desire to be young again...

I'M SO EXCITED! CAPTURES THE SPIRIT OF YOUR CAMP, ANARCHIC 1980S COMEDIES, IN PARTICULAR WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN. WAS IT FUN GOING BACK TO YOUR ROOTS?

I actually thought that making this film would be a much lighter experience for me than the films I've been making but it wasn't like that at all. For the actors it was just a party, day after day. But comedy is one of the most difficult genres because it requires much more precision. But the film was a joy for all of us to make, particularly because it took me back to the tone of the first films that I made when I started off my career. It became unconsciously a kind of tribute to the 80s. That decade impregnated my memories when I was writing.

YOUR FILMS ARE OFTEN BEING TURNED INTO PLAYS, INCLUDING A WOMEN ON THE VERGE...MUSICAL THAT'S COMING TO THE WEST END THIS YEAR. THIS ONE IS SET ALMOST ENTIRELY INSIDE A PASSENGER PLANE. DID YOU HAVE THE STAGE IN MIND?

No, what I had in my head was the typical American screwball comedy. But I did have this red curtain in the film because they have to separate the spaces on the plane, and the idea there is definitely to bring the impression of a theatre stage curtain. And the three stewards, they're just perfect for some sort of Broadway musical comedy; they're like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.

ARE YOU INVOLVED AT ALL IN THE WOMEN ON THE VERGE... MUSICAL, WHICH OPENED ORIGINALLY ON BROADWAY IN 2010?

I'm coming to London for the first workshop. It's the same team but not the same actors. They are going to approach it in a completely different way to what it was on Broadway and I'm very comfortable with that. But I try not to interfere.

IS I'M SO EXCITED! AN ATTEMPT TO PUT A BIT OF LIGHTNESS BACK INTO YOUR WORK AFTER TWO DARK TRAGEDIES, BROKEN EMBRACES AND THE SKIN I LIVE IN?

I wanted to go back to comedy and, thinking about the situation we are living with now in Spain, I thought it was a good idea to release a comedy in this moment. I think it's great to be able to celebrate at this time just being alive, and also to remind people that the greatest gift given to us by nature is sex, and to pay tribute to the new freedoms that we gained here in Spain. It's a good time to think about those things.

BESIDES BEING A LOVE LETTER TO THAT EARLY CAREER EXUBERANCE, THE FILM ALSO FEELS LIKE A CELEBRATION OF GAY SEXUALITY.

I wouldn't say it's necessarily a celebration of homosexuality itself. It's more to do with the fact that it's a screwball comedy. When you're doing a crazy comedy and it's set inside a plane, the obvious

RIGHT

Titillation in *Kika* (1993) and shooting for *Bad Education* (2004)

OPPOSITE PAGE
The Skin I Live In (2011),
Penélope Cruz in
Volver (2006) and
Law of Desire (1987)



thing is to make the three flight attendants who are your main characters as flamboyant as you can. These three are more overtly feminine compared to my other gay characters. But I'm more celebrating the explosion of freedoms that we gained back in the 1980s than homosexuality itself. It's a celebration of feelings and it's a celebration of sexuality itself, whether it's bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, and with virgins or non-virgins.

HAVE YOU EVER DRUNK A VALENCIA COCKTAIL LACED WITH MESCALINE, WHICH IS WHAT THE FLIGHT ATTENDANTS SERVE BUSINESS CLASS?

Oh yes. It was a cocktail very in vogue in the mid-80s, a bit like a Bellini. The real cocktail didn't include mescaline but in 1985 we tried mixing it with mescaline and they were very effective. It was an extremely strong aphrodisiac. I think it lasted only two years because people really went a bit crazy with that concoction.

DO YOU FEEL NOSTALGIA FOR THOSE HEADY DAYS OF DRUG-TAKING AND SEXUAL LIBERATION THAT YOU EXPERIENCED IN MADRID AT THE TIME?

More than nostalgic, I'd just like to be young again. The 80s coincided with two things: it was a new democracy, the new opening up of Spain, and I was also very young at the time. It was the ideal combination. But times have changed, the world has changed. I'm different. We've all changed over the years, for the worse, I fear. The Madrid now is not the Madrid of the 80s because the young people today are not the same as we were. Madrid used to be the city that lived through the night but now that's gone. I think I had much more freedom when I started off being a director than someone like me would have today. And that's more than nostalgia, I think.

YOU FIRST MOVED TO MADRID AGAINST YOUR PARENTS' WISHES, WHEN YOU WERE 17. SPAIN WAS STILL UNDER FRANCO. WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR A YOUNG, LIVELY GAY PERSON DURING THE DICTATORSHIP?

I came from a small village, so Madrid for me symbolised freedom. It was a chance for me to see films, go to the theatre, live my own life. But I also went to London in the early 70s, and that meant much more freedom. It was the moment of what they called 'the permissive society'. It was also when glam rock was hitting the headlines, and David Bowie. Everyone's paying tribute to the great Bowie now. At that time he was a completely liberating experience.

DID YOU GO TO GIGS WHEN YOU CAME TO LONDON, OR WERE YOU LISTENING TO MUSIC IN CLUBS?

I went to both. I remember going to see Alice Cooper, Roxy Music. I even went to a club called Sombrero's where – I don't know if it's true or not – they say David Bowie used to go to, which was near High Street Kensington. That was the only gay place that I went to

in London because all the waiters were Spanish so I could get in for free. Lots of people from the music scene used to hang out there. And I went almost every day to the cinematheque on the South Bank, even though my English was worse than now.

AND WHAT ABOUT MADRID – WERE THERE PLACES TO GO? WHAT KIND OF SOCIAL LIFE DID YOU HAVE?

I've never gone to gay clubs. I've spent my spare time, my life in general, in the same way as any heterosexual. I live, work and love in mixed places. I've never liked ghettos. But that doesn't mean that the life of someone openly gay was easy during the dictatorship. Not at all. Gay clubs did exist under Franco; they existed a lot. But homosexuality was prosecuted and they could put you in prison in the blink of an eye. There was this law for the 'idle and delinquent' that included homosexuality as a punishable crime. When I arrived in Madrid there were so many things to enjoy that I almost didn't realise the underlying horror. Except for some specific moments, I didn't have to face that horror personally.

WHEN DID THINGS REALLY CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?

I remember that fear was in the air, and I remember how that fear disappeared in 1977. Freedom became tangible, something you could feel. For me what was important was the opportunity to write short scripts and make Super-8 movies. Before Franco died we were free inside, behind closed doors, just not outside. The 70s was such an important time for me. I was making short films, I was in the theatre, even my day job working at Telefónica was a learning experience because I was finding out about the middle classes, which came to be important later in my films. But if I hadn't thought the dictatorship was going to end, I would have gone to live in Paris or London.

FROM THE START, YOU CREATED EXPLICITLY SEXUAL NARRATIVES AND HONED YOUR SIGNATURE STYLE FOR FOCUSING ON STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS. DID YOU FEEL YOU COULD DO ANYTHING IN FILM?

The canvas was blank because I was at the beginning and there was freedom. But I had financial limitations, experience limitations. I didn't have money to make the first movie [1978's *Fuck Me, Fuck Me, Fuck Me, Tim!*] so we did something that now has a name – crowd-funding. But what I did have was unlimited desire to become the film-maker I wanted to be. So I made the first couple of no-budget movies and people talked about them and I got the chance to make film number three, *Labyrinth of Passion*, which I actually had a budget to make. I was very fortunate. If I'd become a director five years before, I don't think there would have been the interest internationally because it wasn't until 1985 that people started to say, 'Oh look, Spain's changing, Madrid's changing'. I was just there at the right time.



I READ ONCE THAT YOU DISLIKED BEING CALLED A GAY DIRECTOR, OR COMPARED TO OTHER GAY DIRECTORS WHO MAKE SO-CALLED 'WOMEN'S PICTURES', LIKE GEORGE CUKOR. IS THAT DISTINCTION STILL IMPORTANT TO YOU?

I remember saying that. Here in Spain no one calls anyone a 'gay director' or says they make 'gay movies'. Maybe you get it in the US and England but here nobody pigeonholes you. In the US they always introduce you as 'the gay director'. I said, 'Why do you do that when you'd never say, "This is Ronald Reagan, the straight president?"' I'm not saying it's negative at all to say I'm homosexual, I'm simply saying that there is no sexuality in film itself. I mean, there are film-makers like Derek Jarman who were militant in their approach but I'm not like that. Truman Capote was a so-called flamboyant gay but you would never say that *In Cold Blood* was a gay novel. They pin these adjectives on you so quickly and unthinkingly... I just think they're rude.

ARE YOU A FAN OF THE CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD FILMS WITH STRONG GAY SENSIBILITIES, LIKE CUKOR'S *THE WOMEN*?

I love George Cukor's movies but my movies are not like his. Except perhaps *I'm So Excited!*; that is the one film I've made that has an overt gay sensibility. Just to give you a comparison, *Law of Desire* was the story of two men, but the problems between them could be the same for a heterosexual couple, even though, of course, they were making love, they were naked, they were men. I was very fierce when I started going to America. Even now in Spain, nobody asks me the name of my boyfriend. But I remember when I was in New York for *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, the first question from the *Village Voice* was, 'What's the name of your boyfriend?' I said, 'Go to hell. Do you know what it is to have respect for someone?' What I don't like is to classify because it's not that easy. There are many more things to define a movie.



YOUR FILMS DEPICT GAYS, STRAIGHTS, BISEXUALS AND TRANSSEXUALS ALL FALLING IN AND OUT OF LOVE WITH ONE ANOTHER. YOU VIEW SEXUALITY IN AN EXTREMELY FLUID WAY.

It's what I try to reflect in my films but it's not really about sexuality being fluid, it's something that I see as much more natural than that. I'm portraying a world of fiction in my films but it's also my world, it's the world that I see and live in. If I have gay characters, it's simply one of the characteristics of their personality. Of course, sexuality can lead to problems in relationships. For me it was always about portraying everything without any prejudice. I always made movies like Franco never existed. That was my small revenge.

DO YOU KEEP TABS ON ANY OF THE GAY CINEMA OR GAY FILM-MAKERS OUT THERE? HAVE YOU SEEN *WEEKEND* OR *LAURENCE ANYWAYS*?

Yes, I saw *Weekend*. I haven't seen *Laurence Anyways*. I have it at home and I will do – he's very interesting, Xavier Dolan. I'm also curious about Todd Haynes' work. I think he's brilliant. I'm a good moviegoer: the problem is there are not so many good movies to watch any more. But I like to go to the cinema at least twice a week.

IT WAS GREAT TO SEE PENÉLOPE CRUZ AND ANTONIO BANDERAS CROPPING UP FOR A BRIEF CAMEO IN *I'M SO EXCITED!*

I just spoke to Penélope. She is very big at the moment [Cruz is pregnant with her second child with Javier Bardem]. She called me because she was very sad about Bigas Luna dying [the Spanish director who helped launch Cruz and Bardem in 1992's *Jamon Jamon*].

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING NEXT?

I've got a few scripts ongoing at the moment. They're not as dark as the films I've been making but they're definitely not comedies. *I'm So Excited!* opens on May 3 from Pathé UK