



# All about my mother

**Director:** Pedro Almodóvar

**Country:** Spain

**Date:** 1999

*A review by Philip French for **The Observer**.*

From the start of his career in the early 1980s, Pedro Almodóvar has been fascinated by the Spanish obsession with love and death, with his countrymen's taste for histrionics and emotional extremes, and the traditional rigidity of sexual identity. But until the past couple of years, I found his films, brilliantly crafted as they are, tiresomely camp. Until *Live Flesh* (1997), which I consider a minor masterpiece, the only film of his I'd really admired was the 1986 *Matador*, a schematic thriller about a repressed mother's boy who wants to become a bullfighter, though he can't stand the sight of blood, and confesses to murders he hasn't committed to prove his machismo. *All About My Mother*, which brought Almodóvar the Best Director award at Cannes and should have received the Palme d'Or, is his finest film to date.



This superbly plotted, supremely confident black comedy begins with the senior nurse and single parent, Manuela (Cecilia Roth), watching *All About Eve* on TV with her handsome son, Esteban, on the eve of his 17th birthday. He wants to become a writer, and is engaged on a school project called "All About My Mother", for which he wants to hear about the father he's never met, and about whom he knows nothing.

As a birthday present, he asks if he can attend the closed circuit TV sessions that his mother, an organ transplant co-ordinator, conducts with young doctors, in which she plays the role of the grieving relative of a deceased patient whose organs the hospital is seeking. That night, this scene is repeated for real after Esteban is killed in a road accident while trying to get the autograph of the great actress Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes) outside the Madrid theatre where she's appearing in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The second part of the boy's birthday treat was a visit to the play, which has special associations for Manuela, who as a teenager played Stella in an amateur production opposite the Stanley Kowalski of the man who became Esteban's father.

From then on, *All About Eve* and *Streetcar* run through the plot as leitmotifs. Continuing her son's work of exploration, the grieving Manuela returns to Barcelona, which she left pregnant 17 years before. The train rushes through a long tunnel towards the light, Almodóvar cuts to a shot of the glimmering city from the sky, a taxi takes Manuela past Gaudí's cathedral, but continues on to a suburban waste patch where garish whores parade for kerb crawlers. This, it transpires, is where she once worked, and she meets again her best friend, an ebullient transsexual prostitute (Antonia San Juan) who styles herself *La Agrado*, "the agreeable one".

Manuela discovers that her ex-husband, born Esteban but calling himself Lola after becoming a transvestite prostitute, has stolen *Agrado's* savings and left an idealistic nun, Rosa (Penélope Cruz), pregnant and HIV-positive. Manuela cares for both of them and, meanwhile, becomes the assistant to Huma, whose stage name (a feminised version of the Spanish for "smoke") derives from having taken up cigarettes in imitation of her idol, Bette Davis. When Huma's drug-addicted lover is unfit to play Stella in *Streetcar*, Manuela steps in, identifying passionately with the role. Asked if she can act, she replies: "I can

lie very well and I'm used to improvising." Inevitably, she's accused of behaving like Anne Baxter in *All About Eve*.



This funny, sad and emotionally generous movie is about love, parenthood, friendship and loyalty, about life, art and acting roles, about re-creating oneself according to one's dreams, and about what, if anything, is truly natural. All the performances are excellent, and the picture is immaculately designed in a manner recalling Douglas Sirk's work at Universal in the 50s. While the three writers specifically cited – Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Federico García Lorca – are homosexual, this isn't in a narrow, excluding sense a gay picture. Nor, despite the fact that the only two heterosexual males of any consequence are a boy who dies in the first 10 minutes and an old man with

Alzheimer's whose dog takes him for walks, is this a women's picture other than in the way it draws on certain Hollywood conventions. The film is, however, dedicated "to every actress who has ever played an actress" and to the director's mother.

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