

# THE EVOLUTION OF PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

*The Spanish director made a name for himself with raunchy, transgressive films. His latest is a tender adaptation of Alice Munro.*

**By D. T. Max**

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*Almodóvar produces all his own films, giving him total control. “Not even Scorsese has been able to do that,” he says. Photograph by Mark Peckmezian for the New Yorker*

Many famous directors retreat to the privacy of their own screening rooms, but Pedro Almodóvar still likes to see movies in theatres. He lives off a park on the western side of Madrid, and the art houses are clumped together near Plaza de España, not far away. He tries to go at least once a week. If a studio sends him a screener on DVD and he likes the movie, he will watch it a second time in a cinema.

One day in September, his driver dropped him off near the Cine Renoir, which was showing “Neruda,” a film about the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda directed by Pablo Larraín. As Almodóvar walked toward the theatre, carrying a Prada bag that held a bottle of water, locals recognized him. Spain is passionate about its movies, and Almodóvar, who just turned sixty-seven, is the country’s most famous director since Luis Buñuel. Stout and pale, he stands out among the Madrileños, with wide dark glasses—he suffers from light sensitivity—and a tuft of white hair that a bird appears to have woven on the top of his head.

The Cine Renoir, despite its elegant name, is a small space on the ground floor of an unappealing building—a bomb shelter that shows films. A woman in her twenties asked if she could take a photograph with Almodóvar. Many of his fans are no longer so young. A woman in her sixties praised “Julieta,” his melancholy new film, which is about a mother whose teenage daughter abandons her. “It made me cry,” she said. “I shuddered.”

“*Bueno*,” Almodóvar answered, smiling. “*Muchas gracias. Bueno.*”

Almodóvar, who was a bold showman when he was younger, now carries himself in public at once tentatively and grandly. He clearly enjoys walking unimpeded through the city, but the cinema visits are telling—if you don’t want adulation, why go where you’ll certainly be recognized? He told me, in Spanish, that the advent of the selfie was a relief: “While you gave them an autograph, the other person tended to tell their whole life story.” Some of the fans at the Cine Renoir lingered anyway. Almodóvar’s movies—abiding closeups, conversations full of confidences—make people think he must be a good listener. Another older woman spotted him from inside the theatre and came out. “Wow,” she said. “Congratulations on ‘Julieta.’ I’ve seen all your movies!” Almodóvar seemed relieved to get into the dark. He sat down, folded a light jacket across his lap, and settled in.

Almodóvar began directing feature films in the late seventies. Among his early movies were “Dark Habits” and “Matador.” They featured transvestites, transgender people, bondage, rape, and lots of drug use and sex. His stories blurred the lines between gay and straight, coerced and consensual, comedy and melodrama, the funny and the repulsive, high and low art. It was all delivered with a puzzling cheerfulness that made the movies far more transgressive than if their tone had been serious. Spain had just emerged from decades of dictatorship and repression, and Almodóvar’s films suggested that the country had leaped from Opus Dei to the Mudd Club in a single bound. Critics could not decide whether Almodóvar was the most trivial filmmaker in history or the inventor of an important new strain of postmodernism.

In more recent years, Almodóvar has broadened his subject matter and his tone. He runs his own production company, El Deseo (Desire), with his brother, Agustín. Under the umbrella of El Deseo, Pedro makes whatever movie he wants. A new one comes out every couple of years, as with Woody Allen, but no two Almodóvar movies are alike. His aesthetic has become harder and harder to pin down. Critics regularly announce that he has finally left behind his taste for gender games and melodramatic plots with murdered spouses, only to have his next movie prove them wrong. In 2011, he released “The Skin I Live In,” a lurid thriller in which a plastic surgeon operates on the man who raped his daughter, transforming him into his own female lover. (At the film’s conclusion, the lover shoots him.) Three years later, Almodóvar released “I’m So Excited,” a fizzy comedy about an airline flight during which the male attendants get drunk and perform oral sex on the pilots. He merrily recalls the critical response: “How on earth! At *your* age, how *could* you?” “Julieta,” based on three linked short stories by Alice Munro, is Almodóvar at his most reflective and nuanced.

He can be a fierce critic of other Spanish-language filmmakers, but among those he admires is the forty-year-old Larraín. Almodóvar so dislikes what he calls *los biopics* that he joked to me that he’d inserted a clause into his will prohibiting anyone from making a movie about his life. But Larraín’s film impressed him. “Neruda” focusses on a moment in the poet’s life, a few years after the Second World War, when a hostile Chilean government forced him to flee over the Andes and into Argentina. In Larraín’s fantastical rendering, Neruda is pursued by a police official who is also a great reader; the pursuit becomes more metaphysical than real, a study of the seductions of narrative. Almodóvar watched mostly in silence, but when an actor playing Augusto Pinochet appeared, he made a very Spanish clucking noise with his tongue.

Afterward, he said that the film was lyrical and pretty, “emotional and, at the same time, abstract.” It was easy to detect Almodóvar’s influence on the movie: Neruda was portrayed as a Dionysian figure declaiming verse to half-naked prostitutes, and there was even a transvestite singer whose humanity slowly emerged from beneath his smeared makeup.

In front of the theatre, a row of five-pointed stars was visible in the dirty pavement. “Our Walk of Fame,” Almodóvar explained. “Have you ever seen a more humble thing?” The presence of the steel-and-white-marble stars in the dun concrete seemed ugly to Almodóvar. He has long had a difficult relationship with the Spanish cinema establishment, who helped install the walk in 2011. They have often underestimated his work, and he has lustily attacked them in return, critiquing the obscure nomination process for the Goya Awards, Spain’s equivalent of the Oscars. He joked, “I think they put the stars on the street so you could step on them.” They were in alphabetical order, but we were following them in reverse. We passed Buñuel and finally came to Almodóvar’s name: he was first.

He was beset by selfie-seekers again. He asked a man to wait to take a picture until he put his jacket on, but the man snapped it anyway, then raced off. “He didn’t even care if I got the other arm in!” Almodóvar said, bemused. Shoppers were hurrying past. Motorcycles roared, and there was a lot of honking. Fans kept gathering around him. “I’d better go,” he said. “This corner’s a little dangerous.” He got into his car, and his driver whisked him off.

• • • **1**modóvar was born in 1949, in the small town of Calzada de Calatrava, in the central Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha. His father was a mule driver who led a team of twenty animals across the Sierra Morena to deliver wine to Jaén, in Andalucía. “It was something out of Bizet’s ‘Carmen’ or those novels of Théophile Gautier’s that take place in Spain,” Almodóvar recalls. “But in a time when there were cars and trucks.” He grew up mostly in the company of women. He fell in love with them singly and as a communal force. They were Spain’s secret power. “It was because of women that Spain survived the postwar period,” he says. In a 1988 interview, he described “the Spanish father” as “oppressive, repressive, castrating.” While the men were off working, the women nurtured the children and dealt with births, relationships, and deaths—what Almodóvar calls *los problemas reales*.

One of his fondest memories is of the women of Calzada chatting at the town cemetery as they

tended the graves of their families' dead. "It's basically what you see in 'Volver,'" he explained, referring to his 2006 movie, part of which is set near where he was born. "Death disappeared, because the important thing was the flowers, the conversations." Clothes were washed in the river. "Every La Mancha house had huge interior patios," he said. The women worked lace there and gossiped.

"Tops on the list were babies born out of marriage and suicides," Almodóvar said. "People who threw themselves down the well or hanged themselves from the rafters." He felt immediately the power of story. "It was a mixture of terror and vitality," he said. "It was the origin of life and, at the same time, of fiction and fabulation." As a boy who always felt different from his peers, he took away a second, less encouraging message: "I had no experience of anything, but I knew that this atmosphere was unnatural—or, at least, against *my* nature." He added, "This was the last place I wanted to grow into adulthood."

In 1958, when he was nine, Almodóvar moved, with his parents, brother, and two sisters, to Madrigalejo, a town in Extremadura, in Spain's far west. His intelligence and sophistication already were clear. His mother started a small concern writing and reading letters for illiterate neighbors. Pedro soon realized that she was embroidering the texts she read to them. In a 1999 essay in *El País*, he wrote, "The local women didn't realize it, because the made-up stuff was always an extension of their lives. They were delighted after she read it."

His parents sent him to Catholic boarding school, planning to train him for the Church. He had a beautiful singing voice, and the priests admired him, but he hated the authoritarian education. Some of the priests sexually abused the students. The act of kissing the priest's ring filled him with repulsion; in 2007, he told *GQ* that he "could almost literally see their hands dirtied with sperm." Nevertheless, he was moved by the mystery and pageantry of Catholicism. "I am a *posibilista*," Almodóvar told me repeatedly, a word that can mean both a practical person and an optimist. Rather than reject Catholicism, he made a bet with the Supreme Being. As he put it to me, "I would go to Mass for a year, and then He would show Himself." But God remained invisible, and Almodóvar soon stopped confessing.

He had already found something else to worship. It came in the form of glamorous illustrations of actors, called *cromos*, which were included in packages of Matías López chocolates. "The world of those *cromos*—that's where I knew I wanted to belong," he said. "Not to a world where

young women are locked away in their houses because they are pregnant.”

He and Agustín, who is seven years younger, became regular moviegoers. In Calzada, spectators were expected to bring their own chairs to screenings. “It was like Victor Erice’s ‘Spirit of the Beehive,’ where everyone brings a can with coal,” Almodóvar says. In the summer in Madrigalejo, movies were projected on a wall of a building that, at other times, was used by boys to piss on. “Basically, they put on spaghetti Westerns,” Almodóvar recalls. “But we also saw ‘Los Olvidados,’ by Buñuel, and ‘The Virgin Spring,’ by Bergman.” Those movies explored extremes of behavior, and knowing about such things made Almodóvar feel powerful. When he recounted the plot of the Buñuel to his sisters, he remembers, they looked at him almost with terror. He also saw Welles’s “Chimes at Midnight” and Antonioni’s “Night,” and fell in love with Jeanne Moreau, twice.

By then, Almodóvar had realized that he wanted not just to see movies but to make them, too. At the age of seventeen, he came home from Catholic school and told his parents that he was moving to Madrid. His father, he recalls, “threatened to turn me in to the National Guard.” Pedro replied, “Turn me in. I’m leaving.”

Almodóvar arrived in the capital in 1967, with daunting energy and a huge appetite for art and conversation. He soon had an impressive Mexican-style mustache and long hair. He took on various odd jobs, including working as a disk jockey in a *barra americana*—a dance hall of questionable character—and playing an extra in movies that needed hippies. In 1969, he became an office assistant at Telefónica, the national telephone company, and his employers came to depend on him. “He is a perfectionist, and every company needs a perfectionist,” Agustín Almodóvar said. Pedro kept track of broken telephones that were returned. He found the work easy; it was as good a score as Hawthorne’s job at the Salem customs house. While working there, he began the screenplay for his first feature film.

**G**eneral Franco was still in power, and the repression was both political and cultural. His vicious regime had been hostile to avant-garde movie aesthetics. But by the time Almodóvar showed up in Madrid, Franco was in his mid-seventies, and the choke hold on artistic expression was loosening, at least in the major cities and at universities. Almodóvar intended to enroll in film school, but the city had only one, and Franco, viewing it as a center

of Communism, had all but closed it. Being a *posibilista*, Almodóvar bought a Super 8 camera and began to shoot short films on his own. “I had no budget, no money,” he says. “The important thing was to make movies.” He wrote out complete scripts, even though his camera couldn’t record sound, and changed the characters depending on which of his friends showed up for a shoot. He avoided filming where he might bump into the authorities, and so he made several Biblical epics in the countryside, giving them, he says, “a bucolic and abstract air, the opposite of Cecil B. De Mille’s.” Since he had no money to buy lights, many of the scenes in his Super 8 movies were filmed on rooftops, in parks, and by windows. “Fortunately, Spain is a place with a lot of natural light,” Almodóvar says.

From the beginning, he was interested in the pathology of family relationships and the fluidity of sexuality—ideally, the intersection of the two. For “The Fall of Sodom,” filmed in 1975, he dressed the Sodomites in women’s clothing. Two years later, he made “Sexo Va, Sexo Viene”—“Sex Goes, Sex Comes”—a farce about a lesbian who abuses her boyfriend until he starts dressing like a woman.

The Super 8 movies are too damaged to be shown today, according to Almodóvar. They exist only in his retelling. He projected them for friends in bars, discos, and art galleries. He improvised dialogue, sometimes commenting on the acting, while Agustín, who had followed him to Madrid, provided a soundtrack with recorded music. “It became a sort of performance,” Almodóvar recalls.

Almodóvar’s movies, proudly sophomoric and raunchy, were part of a boisterous artistic and musical movement called La Movida, which was taking hold in Madrid, much of it in Malasaña, a barrio of run-down warehouses and dingy clubs. For inspiration, La Movida looked often to the punk and New Wave movements in England and America. “We imitated their life style,” Almodóvar says. “The way they sang, the way they lived. But it was also mixed up with something that was our own, and very idiosyncratic.” Visual artists, musicians, drug dealers, homosexuals, transvestites, and students gathered through the night in scrappy venues, translating Anglo-Saxon anomie and Teutonic angst into Hispanic vivacity, passion, and humor. A friend remembers Almodóvar showing up at events in a white SEAT sedan with four or five other young male artists, a group assumed to be gay. In fact, he told me, his sexuality was as fungible as one of his characters’. “I slept often with women, too,” he said. “I was

bisexual until the age of thirty-four.”

La Movida was fuelled, in part, by drugs. Madrid had elected a new socialist mayor, and at a rock concert in the city’s sports stadium he astonished the citizenry by proclaiming, “If you aren’t already stoned, get stoned!” Almodóvar generally does not discuss his own experience with drugs, but in 1988 he told an interviewer that what he and Rainer Werner Fassbinder had in common was “we both like cocaine and we’re both fat.” As enthusiastically as Almodóvar participated in the night life of Malasaña, he always had one eye on the exit. “The fact that I had this clear and resounding goal meant that I could be in the middle of the current and not get swept away,” he says. He didn’t want to be a *pasota*—the word of the time for a slacker—or an experimental filmmaker in the Andy Warhol mode. What interested him about movies was their ability to tell heightened stories.

He initially tried to capture La Movida in prose, but decided that he didn’t have the talent for fiction. (He still describes himself as a “frustrated novelist.”) So he worked hard on his screenplays, giving them plenty of twists. Most Movida members focussed on art, music, or poetry, all of it cheap and quick. Almodóvar was capable of imagining larger enterprises that needed funding and the coöperation of other talented people. In the mid-seventies, he recalls, he appeared in a local production of Sartre’s “Dirty Hands,” taking “the smallest role in the play”—three lines. At the theatre, he became friends with an established actress by the name of Carmen Maura. He liked to watch her put on her makeup (a memory that finds an echo in the dressing-room intimacies of his 1999 film, “All About My Mother”). She went on to star in seven movies for him, becoming his most famous muse.

In the late seventies, Maura and another actor, Félix Rotaeta, helped Almodóvar graduate from the Super 8 short to the 16-mm. feature. They began a fund-raising campaign among their friends and raised eight thousand dollars. Meanwhile, an avant-garde magazine asked Almodóvar to write something “*my punk*.” In response, he started a narrative fashioned from captioned images: “General Erections” was about a night-club competition over penis size. The winner got to ask anyone in the audience for any sex act he wanted. Franco had just died, and this sort of dirty humor resonated with Spaniards at the time. Many young people doubted the value of their new political freedom, but they never disparaged their sexual freedom.

Almodóvar did not publish the narrative, deciding that instead it should be the centerpiece of a

film. He built around it a plot that seemed like a headlong remake of one of his favorite films, George Cukor's "The Women." The casting was casual. Alaska, a fourteen-year-old La Movida singer, became one of the film's stars. "It mattered more what clothes you had than how you could act," she says. The movie, "Pepi, Luci, Bom," was shot on weekends over thirteen months; filming halted when there was no money. Almodóvar recalls spending the largest part of the budget on food and alcohol. "This was logical," he said, on a Spanish talk show. "The people had to be content."

"Pepi, Luci, Bom" is amateurish but winning, focussing, as nearly every Almodóvar film does, on relationships among women. Men are confined to supporting roles in which they are rarely supportive. Luci, a masochist, leaves her husband, a police officer, for Bom, a dominatrix. This leads to an Almodovarian irony: the police officer reacts to Luci's embrace of sadomasochism by raping her, which leaves her in a hospital bed, expressing gratitude to him. The institution of marriage has prevailed!

The camera work is rough—Almodóvar himself starred as the master of ceremonies for the General Erections contest, and the framing of the shot accidentally cuts off his head. ("It didn't seem important enough to repeat the shot," he recalls.) But some of the acting is impressive, especially that of Carmen Maura, who, as Pepi, makes a lovely, good-humored impression. Almodóvar is already showing his skill at directing women, and in casting Maura as Pepi, the unshockable onlooker and gentle encourager of her friends, he was really casting himself. Javier Pérez-Grueso, an artist in the La Movida scene, who is known as Furia, recalls, "She was his alter ego—optimistic, gracious, and a bit zany."

"Pepi, Luci, Bom" was shown at the San Sebastián Film Festival in 1980. Some critics savaged the low production values, but others argued that this attested to the film's urgency and cultural authenticity. Who cared if the director hadn't miked the actors properly? *El Periódico* perceptively praised Almodóvar as "a stubbornly passionate defender of substandard movies." The film became a staple of late-night Madrid—a "Rocky Horror Picture Show" for the Spanish—and highly profitable.

Spanish producers began courting Almodóvar, but he fought them over creative control. He made his 1983 feature, "Dark Habits," with money from the industrialist Jacques Hachuel, who

insisted on casting his wife, Cristina Sánchez Pascual, in the starring role of a wayward dancer who enters a convent. Almodóvar didn't think that Sánchez Pascual could sing or dance well enough to carry the movie, and so he expanded the roles of other, more talented actresses. "The final result is that they grew and Cristina shrank," he remembers. The producer of his next project, "What Have I Done to Deserve This?," tried, without success, to force Almodóvar to eliminate a character who had magical powers. "What they didn't understand was that Pedro is a genius," Agustín says. "And that his value is precisely his energy and his brilliance. You have to channel him, but you can't put him in a straitjacket."

In 1985, the brothers founded El Deseo, in part to protect Pedro from such battles. Agustín ran the business side. By profession, he was a chemistry teacher, but his relationship with Pedro was the crucial thing in his life. Agustín explained to me that his sole purpose at El Deseo is to help "Pedro make the movie he wants." He has played bit parts in most of the movies.

The brothers agreed to strict rules. The movies would have modest budgets—around ten million dollars—which meant that Almodóvar forever after made movies in which people go in and out of rooms talking, rather than ones in which they blow each other up in cars. Creating his own production company allowed Pedro an unusual luxury: he could often shoot a movie from first page to last, rather than in the least expensive order. Almodóvar felt that a chronological approach yielded more persuasive performances. "I owe Agustín the independence and liberty that I enjoy as a director," Pedro says. "It's completely without precedent. Not even Scorsese himself has been able to do that."

• • • **O**men on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," Almodóvar's eighth feature and his second under El Deseo, was released in 1988. The movie began with a script based on Jean Cocteau's play "The Human Voice," in which a woman is heard on the phone speaking to an unseen lover who is breaking up with her. Almodóvar had made six movies in eight years, enjoying successively larger budgets and audiences. He wanted to return to his past, he told me, to make a "*muuy, muuy* underground film, with just one set."

But the script felt too slight, and so he started the story forty-eight hours earlier, transforming Cocteau's intense portrait of a woman in crisis into a farcical roundelay of various women betrayed by men and their own credulous, loving natures. The story was frantic to the point of

giddiness, with a plot that pivoted around a blender of gazpacho, laced with sleeping pills, that the main character plans to offer to her unfaithful boyfriend. Some of the film's hectic appeal came from the screwball script and some from its look—extraordinarily bright Pop-art sets that were filmed in a superwide format that echoed CinemaScope. The art direction seemed determined to erase the distinction between life and the lifelike. Everything in the movie—from the stagy view of the Madrid skyline to the gazpacho, which puts one person after another to sleep, as if they were characters in an operetta—seemed to belong more to the world of *cromos* than to reality.

“Women on the Verge” gave Maura her best role, as Pepa, the lovelorn but unsinkable reimagining of Cocteau's despairing protagonist. “Our relationship was at its maximum intensity,” Almodóvar says. “I felt it was a miracle to have that instrument.” He cast the young Antonio Banderas as the male lead. For the role of Banderas's virginal fiancée, Almodóvar selected Rossy de Palma, a musician with the high forehead, bulging eyes, and refracted nose of a Picasso. (The *Times* once called her “unforgettably strange-looking.”) The script called for De Palma to spend much of the film inert, after drinking Pepa's gazpacho. At one point, she complained to Almodóvar that lying in a deck chair, pretending to be out cold, was boring. In response, Almodóvar wrote her a scene in which she dreams that she is having sex. “Good thing I was a pain and pushed him,” she recalls. “It got me that lovely orgasm.”

“Women on the Verge” was at once a spoof of, and an anthem to, a liberated Spain. Like the Movidia scene that Almodóvar had emerged from, it was optimistic and eager to please. The film received an Oscar nomination and was an international box-office hit. His mother, however, was unimpressed with her son's new fame: she told him that he should go back to his Telefónica job.

The troupe of actors who populated Almodóvar's films became famous as well. Over the years, he assembled his team by hand, like George Clooney in “Ocean's Eleven.” He recruited Rossy de Palma at a bar. He approached Antonio Banderas at the iconic Café Gijón, where the nineteen-year-old was relaxing with friends after a performance at the Teatro María Guerrero. Banderas remembers a fast-talking man with a red plastic briefcase sitting down with them: “He said to me, ‘You have a romantic face. You should be in movies.’ And then he left.” Shortly afterward, Banderas was offered a role in “Labyrinth of Passion.” Penélope Cruz received a

phone call after appearing in a Spanish comedy. “My friend said, ‘Almodóvar is on the phone.’ I thought it was a joke.” She felt honored to speak to him. “He was almost a political figure, a representation of change, of democracy,” she recalls. He promised her, “I’m going to write you a small character.” It was a part in the 1997 melodrama “Live Flesh.” She has since appeared in four more of his feature films. Almodóvar and his actors became fixtures on the Madrid restaurant circuit. “We were almost like the Rolling Stones,” Banderas says. “We were a group. We would go out to clubs and dinners and travel together. People would say, ‘Here comes the Almodóvar gang.’ ”

**A**lmodóvar’s apartment is a few blocks from the Malasaña district, which is now thoroughly sanitized. He lives alone, except for a cat named Lucio, who, in proper Almodóvar fashion, has switched genders. In 2010, during the filming of “The Skin I Live In,” in Toledo, local children left a cat with one of the set porters, asking that it be called Lucía by its next owner. The cat was passed on to Almodóvar, and it turned out that the children had not looked carefully enough between its legs. “We had an instant sex change!” Almodóvar jokes, adding, “A cat is the right pet for a selfish writer.” He explained, “If you dedicate your life to the movies, to writing or painting, the life you can offer another person is very precarious. I couldn’t have the strength or the right to ask another person to accept this sort of life.” Similar words are spoken by the world-weary director Pablo in his 1987 movie, “Law of Desire.” The Spanish papers report that he remains in a long-term relationship with a photographer who has had small roles in his movies, but Almodóvar is steadfast in saying that he has no partner.

Almodóvar’s infatuation with his adopted city has cooled. “I don’t want to sound disappointed,” he declares, sounding that way. “But Madrid and I are like a fifty-year-long marriage. We’re based more in routine than excitement.” Madrid, he grouses, is turning into a Spanish Oslo; then again he has grown more staid himself. He has long since stopped going to night clubs: “I don’t drink. I don’t smoke. And I don’t do drugs.” Cigarette smoke bothers him, and he is deaf in one ear and losing his hearing in the other—worrisome for a director who is so attuned to script and voice that he tries never to watch dubbed movies.

The walls of Almodóvar’s living room are orange, and on them he has hung four surrealist Man Ray photographs, including one of an iron with tacks stuck to the soleplate. Nearby is a

Warhol silk screen of a bright-yellow cow. There are also objects of more personal significance, including a sculpture, by Miquel Navarro, of a seated man with a penis like a piece of pipe. It plays a prominent role in “Julietta.” “Pick it up—it’s surprisingly heavy,” Almodóvar said, noting that he was repeating a moment from the film. I also saw a picture frame, encrusted with blue marbles, that is identical to the one smashed onto the floor in “The Flower of My Secret.” A photograph of Almodóvar’s beloved mother, who died in 1999, now occupies the frame. Almodóvar’s shelves are as full of playful figurines and gaudy magnets as a Tribeca toy store. Over all, the apartment has the continually dusted look of a prominent artist’s studio. Almodóvar has a cook, and while we were talking his personal assistant, a young man in shorts, hovered nearby. This was Osama. If Almodóvar wanted tea, Osama made it for him. (Osama, too, gets a cameo in “Julietta.”)

Almodóvar showed me a nook that he calls his “DVD-oteca.” A green couch with summery throw pillows sat opposite a TV installed in a shelving unit. Osama had tried to organize the holdings—some three thousand DVDs—but had given up. “They’re by genre,” Almodóvar explained. “And sometimes by director, if there are enough disks. There are Orson Welles, Rossellini, Visconti, Kazan. For someone from the provinces who lived dreaming of going to a different place, all the problems that Kazan talked about in ‘Splendor in the Grass’ seemed to me straight out of the town I grew up in.” There was a shelf marked “Joyas” (“Jewels”), with “The Palm Beach Story,” “Blue Velvet,” “Gun Crazy,” “Ed Wood,” and the 1936 kitsch horror classic “Devil Doll,” whose shrinking actors helped inspire the surreal movie-within-a-movie in “Talk to Her,” in which a man gives himself an elixir and disappears into his girlfriend’s vagina.

Alfred Hitchcock had his own section. Homages to Hitchcock appear often in the movies of Almodóvar, who shares a fondness for the bravura shot. In “Kika,” for example, one senses the kinship in the way the moon dissolves into a washing-machine window, or a moving train’s side panels begin to look like unspooling film. For Almodóvar, Hitchcock is the indispensable director. “Whenever I bump into one of his films on TV, it’s incredible how I can’t stop watching,” he said. “The color in my movies is very Caribbean, and it has a Baroque quality—the same as Hitchcock’s.”

Some of Almodóvar’s twenty feature films occupied a modest bottom shelf. If he watches any of them again, he can’t help but notice flaws—a poor shot, a line spoken by an actor that misses

the effect Almodóvar was after—but he tries to let them go. “I don’t see them as faults but as part of the adventure,” he said. I asked him which of his films he liked best. “‘Talk to Her’ is the one that has the fewest moments I don’t like,” he said.

Later, we discussed the 2004 film “Bad Education,” which centers on two friends in a Catholic school, one of whom has been sexually abused by a priest. Almodóvar had been criticized, sometimes rightly, for treating rape as yet another plot device, but this film made clear that he understood the horror of it. The actor Gael García Bernal is said to have had a strained relationship with Almodóvar on the set. Almodóvar spoke of the shoot haltingly, mentioning that one of the actors had been driven to physical and mental exhaustion by the character he’d written; there were plenty of times when Almodóvar was afraid he wasn’t going to be able to finish the movie. He stated this with tact, but without excess sympathy: he clearly finds the inability to get actors to satisfy his demands one of the hardest parts of being a director. Referring to Antonio Banderas’s role as a mad plastic surgeon in “The Skin I Live In,” he said that the movie was a metaphor. “I spoke in a very direct way through the character,” he explained. “He’s a psychopath, close to what it is to be a director.” He noted that Truffaut once defined a director as someone who is driving a train without brakes and trying to keep it on the tracks.

To keep his train on the tracks, Almodóvar plans out the entire shoot and then instructs his actors with great precision. “I don’t want to suggest that it’s the only way to do it,” he says. “But I’m a partisan of writing ironclad screenplays, going over them many times, solving all the problems on paper. If there’s something that doesn’t work in the screenplay, it’s going to be impossible to solve it in the filming.”

He rehearses his actors extensively, playing their roles in front of them to show them how lines should be read. “You have to be careful not to imitate him,” Rossy de Palma, who has a memorable supporting role in “Julietta,” says. “You want to do it exactly the same way, but you have to make it yours.” Almodóvar goes to remarkable lengths to offer guidance. In 1985, he was filming the final scene in “Matador,” with Assumpta Serna. He was not sure whether Nacho Martínez, playing the wounded matador who was about to make love to her, should graze her crotch directly with his mouth or do so with a rosebud between his teeth. Almodóvar tried it out himself. “I realized it was better to put some distance between the actor’s tongue

and the girl's sex," he said, during an appearance on a Spanish talk show. "I do it all," he added.

Actors are often both thrilled and terrified by his technique. When I told Banderas that Almodóvar said he directed him as if Banderas were a child, he did not disagree. He also told me, "I try to become almost a white canvas, so he can paint on it." Almodóvar often shoots multiple takes of each scene, sometimes without giving feedback; unlike most directors, he edits as he goes. Actors, for their part, often can't tell when a shot has succeeded. Banderas called the experience "a very creative Hell." He added, "When you finish the process, you are exhausted and very insecure. But when you see the result it is spectacular."

Almodóvar dislikes self-conscious actorly technique—anything that interferes with his direction. "Sometimes it's so out of the box and so unusual, the things that he may ask you to do," Banderas says. "Some American actors couldn't cope. They come with a lot of B.S., and they work their characters from the inside out—Stanislavski and other techniques. Pedro doesn't give a shit about that. If you're open and you follow instructions, it goes well, but if you oppose that, or if you try to impose your own ideas over his, you're going to have a very hard confrontation." Almodóvar confirms this, adding, "I can be very authoritarian."

His methods ultimately alienated Carmen Maura. In the late eighties, they feuded—it became a front-page story in Spain. In 1990, Almodóvar appeared at the Goya Awards with a piece of the Berlin Wall and announced from the stage that if that wall could fall down surely the one between Maura and him could as well. In 2006, she appeared in her first Almodóvar movie in eighteen years, "Volver," playing a mother who makes a ghostly return to her daughters' lives. But in 2012 Maura told *El País* that she was happier working with less rigid directors. "His shoots are tense," she said. "And that doesn't appeal to me." Agustín Almodóvar tweeted a response: "Don't worry. We won't call you."

**A**lmodóvar analyzes his own films with an amiable facility and a disconcerting distance, as if someone else had made them. He told me that he sees his movies as falling into three groups. First came the decade of playful, often kitschy films, "full of humor and nonsense." This was followed by a decade of moody melodrama that blended the psychological thrills of Hitchcock with the perfumed swoon of Douglas Sirk. Almodóvar begins this period with "Kika," the glossily filmed story of a makeup artist whose rape becomes the subject of a tabloid

show.

According to Almodóvar, it was only in this second phase that he began to appreciate his rural background. He points especially to the 1995 movie “Flower of My Secret,” in which a romance writer who is disappointed in love abandons her luxurious life in Barcelona. She returns with her mother to their native town, where they join the village’s older women outside to sew and gossip. (The women share a story that Pedro heard often as a child, about a neighbor who killed herself by jumping into a well.) In his career’s third phase, he said, “pain is more present” and emotions are less cut with irony. “Talk to Her,” “Bad Education,” and “The Skin I Live In” all reflect this darker mode.

After leaving the DVD-oteca, we headed into his home office. He keeps his writing projects in a neat stack on his desk, along with clippings that he finds interesting. In the pile was a printout of an e-mail from Jeanne Moreau, which he had yet to answer. He showed me the elegant notebooks that he buys at Fabriano, in Rome. Inside one of them were decade-old drawings from the making of “Volver,” one of which depicted the moment when Penélope Cruz, the film’s star, leans over the body of her dead husband in the kitchen. He had recently printed out an article from *El País* about the psychological damage done to intersexuals who are surgically assigned a gender at birth. It was a fecund notion for Almodóvar, whose early insistence on the complexity of sexual orientation now seems prescient. He told me, “Binary gender is condemned to disappear.”

This did not stop him from playing with the question of whether there was such a thing as a gay sensibility in film. “The furious aesthetic of my films has to do with a liberation that is connected to sexuality,” he said. But, he noted, gay people don’t always make gay art. He offered Truman Capote by way of example: “In ‘In Cold Blood’ there’s no trace of the person who is Truman Capote. But Holly Golightly in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’ is a predecessor of all the drag queens of the nineties. She’s a transvestite. You probably have to be gay to see it.” He went on, “And the role of George Peppard? He’s a hustler, and his clients aren’t women—they’re guys! You get this. You *smell* it.” Of his own films, he puts “I’m So Excited” and “Women on the Verge,” which has no gay characters, into the “gay director” category. He excludes “Law of Desire,” which features a gay love triangle, because jealousy is universal. “Julieta” is a straight movie, he said, and so is “Volver.” “That’s my heterosexual side,” he

explained.

On a typical morning, Almodóvar gets up around ten. He reads the news on his computer, searching for material that might spark his imagination, and then he writes for a few hours. After lunch, he sometimes writes a bit more. Then he may go for a walk, which helps him digest what he's written. Unlike most writers, he doesn't isolate himself from other media while he's working. He prefers movies to television, but he has two favorite series, "Homeland" and "Breaking Bad."

Almodóvar always has several scripts going at once, and often writes just to see what comes out. He told me about a few of his embryonic projects. One script, which was partly inspired by the recent Netflix serial "Making a Murderer." It focusses not on a falsely accused suspect but on the police, witnesses, and judges who warp justice. He is also writing what he called an "eco-fiction." He didn't tell me much about the script, beyond noting that the male protagonist is a human and the female protagonist is an animal. "I've got a lot of pages written," he said. "I lack only an ending." I could sense how pleased he was with the possibilities of a story that added interspecies complications to the stock difficulties of a relationship. He went on, "Normally, during my writing period—which is always—there's a moment that I decide, This is the movie I'm going to make. This happens when one of the screenplays is either nearly done or seems sufficiently mature." He sees this process as essentially outside his control. He says that he is "a medium," awaiting which project will declare itself ready to be filmed.

He voraciously reads fiction, often seeking out books with an eye toward filming them. He has just begun an adaptation of a Henry James story; he didn't want to say which one. "The movie might be done in two years," he said. "It might be done in six." None of these unrealized films, he promised, would be "super-big productions."

Later, he noted that about ten years ago he'd been tempted to become a different kind of director. A French producer had offered him money to adapt "Suite Française," by Irène Némirovsky. "It was marvellous," he said of the novel. "But it just seemed to me that Paris occupied by the Germans, with so many characters, was a big production. I'm always a little reluctant to get involved in a big production. The more money there is in the budget, the more compromises you have to make with that money." Small-budget films, he added, come with plenty of problems of their own. "But you are *owner* of that difficulty," he said. "And that is of

the greatest importance.”

Almodóvar has a fitful friendship with America, the world’s dominant cinematic culture. After “Women on the Verge,” he got many offers from Hollywood. He turned down “Sister Act,” the 1992 comedy about singing nuns, and in the early aughts he nearly agreed to direct “Brokeback Mountain.” He said of these demurrals, “Maybe it’s because I didn’t trust my English. Or maybe it’s because, even though they always tell me I’ll have artistic liberty—final cut—there is always a moment when I don’t believe it.”

He appreciates the fact that American film critics championed his work from the start, but one aspect of their support confused him: many defined him as a gay director. It was a useful label for him—the gay press helped to make him well known in the States—but an ironic one for an artist whose films had done so much to suggest that sexuality was not so easily defined. The label also personally irritated Almodóvar, who was not interested in the identity politics that were then energizing the gay movement in America. “I was in New York when the outing thing was going on—‘So and so is gay,’ with enormous posters of famous people,” he says. “I was totally against it.” He recalls, with frustration, a journalist asking him, “What’s your boyfriend’s name?” “That’s the *first* thing they ask you in the United States!” he says. “That and your box-office numbers.” He eventually got used to Americans describing him as “openly gay,” and came to realize why many Americans found it necessary to counter homophobia by coming out. “In Spain, in that era, you didn’t need to say anything,” he noted. “People just knew it. I’d never had to make any confession.”

Over the years, he became fond of New York. Whenever a new movie was released, his friend Kim Hastreiter, the editor of *Paper*, threw a party for him and introduced him to interesting New Yorkers. (Almodóvar’s English is surprisingly deft, but it tends to fly apart in moments of excitement.) Through Hastreiter, he met John Waters, whose films he had long admired. Hastreiter recalls Almodóvar asking her, “Who are the next photographers, who are the new fashion designers, who are the new young people making movies?” He didn’t care if they were successful or rich. “He liked to meet the freaks,” she told me. “If you were a freak, he liked you.” The fashion photographer Henny Garfunkel took him to such night clubs as Jackie 60 and the Roxy, and Madonna took him out dancing. He admired RuPaul, Lady Bunny, and Lahoma, “the great stars of the New York night.” He also became friendly with American

intellectuals, among them Susan Sontag. She disapproved of the title “Flower of My Secret,” which Almodóvar had taken from a Valencian poet. He recalls, “She said to me, ‘Pedro, the next time you translate a title, ask me, because in English you can’t say, “The something of something,” because it means absolutely nothing.’ I answered that it was a metaphor everyone had to interpret, because it didn’t belong to nature. But she said, ‘Yes, but in English it doesn’t work that way.’ I’m sure she was right in English, but its meaning was atmospheric and dramatic.”

In 1989, the film executive Michael Barker arranged a meeting between Almodóvar and his idol Billy Wilder. They had lunch, and at the end of it Wilder told him that he had one piece of advice: “Don’t come to Hollywood, no matter what.” At that moment, Almodóvar says, he saw in Wilder’s eyes “memories of compromises, failures, and misunderstandings.”

“**J**ulieta” came about through yet another flirtation with Hollywood. Almodóvar had long been an enthusiastic reader of Alice Munro, despite obvious differences of background and temperament. He particularly admired three linked stories in Munro’s 2004 collection, “Runaway.” The protagonist, named Juliet, has a twenty-year-old daughter who disappears into a cult. Almodóvar was attracted by the female characters and by a crucial sequence involving strangers on a train—he says he had always wanted to shoot on a train, as Hitchcock had famously done.

In 2009, Almodóvar optioned the stories. He knew little of Canada, where Munro’s fiction is set. He had just been awarded an honorary degree from Harvard, and he thought of moving the action to Boston. Juliet, who in Munro’s story is a middle-class teacher, could work at a school there. Her lover and eventual partner—during the course of the story, Juliet moves in with a fisherman named Eric—could live on the coast of Maine.

Within two years, he had produced a well-wrought script. He asked Meryl Streep to consider playing Juliet. But he began to feel deep unease about his ability to capture the New England context. The nuances of Spanish culture are essential to his movies. He did not want to portray the United States coarsely.

At one point, Juliet travelled to Maine and met her lover’s housekeeper. Almodóvar had his dialogue translated into English, and the results were tentative: “I had everything ship shape

(or some local expression).” When Juliet went out on the street in Boston and smiled at everyone, he added a marginal note: “Consider if Boston society would naturally accept such Mediterranean behavior as that of being openly looked at in the street.” Almodóvar next moved the action to New York City—the place in America he knew best—but he still couldn’t overcome his misgivings. “I didn’t feel certain, either of the English in the script or of my English,” he said. “I speak well enough to direct actors, but I’m talking about the *idea*.” After a year, he put aside the film, which he had titled “Silence,” after one of the Munro stories. (A phantom trace of Almodóvar’s effort could be seen in “The Skin I Live In”: the Spanish edition of Munro’s collection appears in one scene.)

In 2014, a year after the release of “I’m So Excited,” Almodóvar travelled to the Algarve coast of Portugal with two longtime female assistants. They talked about what he should do next. Noting how much they had loved the “Silence” script, the women suggested that he move its story to Spain.

He loved the idea, and quickly wrote a new draft. “In that moment, I followed my own path and forgot about Munro,” he said. “It’s like that moment when adolescents forget about their parents and begin to lead their own lives.”

By the time the script was ready to shoot, he had made many narrative changes. He gave Juliet’s daughter a lesbian relationship from which she fled to a spiritual retreat. (Munro presents it as a passing teen friendship.) In Munro’s version of the train scene, where Juliet meets the man she will marry, she kisses him but doesn’t let it go further; she is having her period and feels unclean. In Almodóvar’s version they make rapturous love and conceive their daughter. “Hers is the feminine version, mine the masculine,” Almodóvar jokes.

The biggest change that Almodóvar made was to the ending. In the third Munro story, Juliet gives up; her daughter is gone. She moves on with her life. In Munro’s version, the quest ends with a sigh: “She keeps on hoping for word from Penelope but not in any strenuous way. She hopes, as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort.”

Almodóvar saw this ending as impossible for him to film. By way of explanation, he told me the story of his childhood departure from Madrigalejo: “I was able to get away to freedom in

Madrid, but the first thing I did when I got there was call my mother, and she asked me if it was cold and if I had put on a sweater or not.” The ending he engineered for “Julieta” is not Munro’s, but it is more open-ended than usual for Almodóvar, who tends to tie up his complicated plots with a heavy bow (if not a gunshot).

By the time he finished filming, in August, 2015, Almodóvar felt that he had made so many changes that he owed Munro an explanation. He had replaced Juliet’s covert inquietude with Julieta’s all-consuming suffering. He began a letter, but on the day I visited him it was still in draft form. He said, “It’s not a justification but a declaration of love toward the work, and an explanation of where I have taken it as a filmmaker, because clearly I’ve taken it on a long journey.” He had been working on the letter for two months, but, like a character in one of his melodramas, he was vacillating. He told me recently, “The truth is I don’t know if I’ll ever send it.”

Almodóvar is proud of the film, which he sees as inaugurating a fourth phase in his career. There were no short-cuts in “Julieta,” he told me—no mixing of genres, no pratfalls. “It is a very different movie from my others,” he said. “I imposed sobriety and compression every day of the shoot. It was deliberate.” He went on, “I had thought to have more movement of the camera, but when I was filming them in closeup I saw no reason to move it. When I speak of ‘simplify,’ I also mean technical simplicity.” He was echoing Munro, “a mistress of simplicity.”

Filming sustained closeups puts a great strain on performers. Almodóvar chose two actresses to play Julieta, one in her early thirties and one middle-aged. The older replaces the younger halfway through the story, when Julieta takes a bath after the death of her husband, Xoan. She covers her head with a reddish-brown towel (from Almodóvar’s apartment), and when she lifts it off she has aged twenty years. I met the two actresses, Adriana Ugarte and Emma Suárez, one day in New York. The women had the slightly shell-shocked quality that I had come to recognize in Almodóvar’s heroines. The situation reminded me of a comment made by Max Espejo, the director of B movies in “Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!”: sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between a love story and a horror story.

Ugarte played the younger Julieta, Suárez the older. Both had been eager to work with Almodóvar, though they knew of his controlling predisposition. They were friendly, and thought about discussing the role together, but decided against it. As Suárez put it, “We

realized that he would lay down the guidelines. It would have been quite dangerous for us to do so independently.” The only time they worked together, at Almodóvar’s request, was to rehearse walking, so that they could match each other’s gait.

Ugarte, the less experienced of the two, praised Almodóvar’s oversight. She asked him how she should act in her final scene, midway through the story, in which she is in a deep depression after Xoan’s death. According to Ugarte, he told her, “You’re not alive, but you aren’t dead either. You’re empty. You’re empty of muscles, of bones, of feelings.” She remembered another key moment, in which Xoan tells her that he has had an affair. Almodóvar made her play the scene two dozen times. She recalls him calling out highly varied instructions: “More restrained,” “Very Italian,” “Shout more,” “Cry,” “Don’t cry.” Almodóvar told me, “I think her personality pushed her to a more aggressive and visceral reaction, less adult. In my opinion, it was an age problem. Adriana followed my instructions as well as she could, but I think she never got to *feel* what I was asking of her.”

Suárez arrived six weeks into the shoot, as Ugarte was finishing up, and picked up the baton. Almodóvar asked Suárez if she was prepared. “Not prepared, but looking forward to it,” she replied delicately. Suárez, too, had to do a scene over and over—a hospital scene between her and Ava, Xoan’s mistress. She could tell that Almodóvar felt something was not working. “It took a whole day to do the scene,” Suárez says. “And when it was over, after twenty tries, Pedro still was not convinced. And I went home with the sensation of having failed. To feel like you’ve failed with Pedro is very frustrating. I had to maintain my dignity, because the next day I had to go back and face the same scene again.” This time, Almodóvar was satisfied after one take. (He says that the problem had nothing to do with her performance but with a continuity issue involving a scarf that Suárez was wearing.) Suárez notes, “Almodóvar is not an excessively affectionate person. He is a professional in that sense and maintains his distance. So that’s a challenge.”

Almodóvar had his own challenge on the set: he had to shoot the movie digitally, since he was no longer able to find a place to develop celluloid film in Spain. The change did not make him happy. Digital focus, he said, is so sharp that “it makes everything seem flat.” Moreover, he found that the technology interfered with his famous eye for color. “I like dense, contrasting colors,” he said. “There were colors on the set—for instance, the gray-green of the walls in

Julieta's apartment—that I was never able to convey with digital.”

“In ‘Julieta’ you see more the influence of Ingmar Bergman than of Preston Sturges,” Almodóvar told me when I sat with him in his apartment in Madrid. His throat was bothering him, and he had a cup of tea at hand. “Both as a person and a filmmaker, despite the big difference in culture and talent—I mean, we’ll never be comparable—I find the trail of Bergman is clearer than before.” He added, “It’s evident that my ability to make ‘Julieta’ in the way I have, and being able to draw inspiration from Munro, is the result of having made nineteen movies.” He cautioned me not to read too much biography into his new seriousness. No personal event had made him turn to a story about loss. “But, yes, what’s more meaningful than a loss is the fact of living day to day, and of being older than sixty.” He added, “Age makes you feel losses in general, many different kinds, every day.”

To Almodóvar’s dismay, the *début* of “Julieta” in Spain, earlier this year, went badly. At home, Almodóvar is still beloved as a comic director—“I’m So Excited” did well at the box office—and the release coincided awkwardly with press reports, based on the Panama Papers leak, that Pedro and his brother had placed fifty thousand dollars in an offshore holding company that they had founded. This was particularly scandalous for a public figure who had retained a countercultural air. The day after the leak, a television reporter pursued Almodóvar from a building to his car. “Why don’t you calm down?” the reporter said as the visibly agitated director hurried across a plaza. Almodóvar, wearing a foulard furled around his neck, retorted, “If you leave me *alone*, I’ll calm down.”

Almodóvar petulantly cancelled all his domestic press for “Julieta,” and he and Agustín hinted that they might take action against anyone who publicly speculated about the purpose of the Panama funds. (Agustín wrote an open letter to the press, saying that they had funded the company with an eye toward possible expansion of *El Deseo*. He apologized for embarrassing his brother.) Twenty thousand people signed a petition, under the rubric “All About My Money,” asking Pedro for a fuller explanation.

Perhaps because of this tumult, Spanish reviewers seemed more critical than usual. Some writers objected precisely to what Almodóvar considered his accomplishment: that he had left his past behind. His movies are now far less Spanish, just as Spain is far less Spanish. This is a

change that he, too, has noticed. After Julieta runs into a childhood friend of her daughter's, she wanders, distraught, through an elite area of Madrid that looks as generic as uptown Manhattan. "If it were set in the eighties, this woman never would have wound up going home alone," Almodóvar told me. "She would have shared her problems with every person she met."

Alberto Rey, writing a blog post for *El Mundo*, objected to the new "Almodovarlandia," with its "cultivated and well-read people, who live in apartments with stupendous parquet floors, use only the best skin creams, and suffer a lot while they walk along fancy streets." Almodóvar has certainly become more bourgeois over the years. I used to admire the way his movies conveyed his love for Madrid's humble bus system: in "Dark Habits," Cristina Pascual takes multiple buses to flee some thugs; in "Live Flesh," Penélope Cruz gives birth on the No. 26 line. In recent movies, there are a lot of cabs and private cars. Where, Rey asked in his blog post, had the old Almodóvar gone, the one "capable of understanding, summarizing, wringing out, and explaining Spain?" Playing off the Spanish word *volver*, he ended with "Pedro, *vuelve*" —"Come back."

One warm night in September, twenty or so of Almodóvar's friends met up at La Trainera, a well-known seafood restaurant in the elegant Salamanca section of Madrid, to celebrate his birthday. Among them were various *chicos* and *chicas Almodóvar*, including Elena Anaya, who brilliantly played the character who is forced to undergo surgery in "The Skin I Live In," and the three festive flight attendants from "I'm So Excited." The guests gathered in a private room at a long table; at the head of it was Almodóvar, dressed in dark-blue pants and an untucked mustard-colored Hermès polo shirt. The man described by the Spanish press as Almodóvar's companion sat at the other end and discreetly avoided photographs. (Penélope Cruz was absent with a cold.)

One chair by Almodóvar's side remained open. "Bibi's always late," Almodóvar said affectionately.

Soon Bibiana Fernández came in, to applause.

Six feet tall and striking, Fernández is one of Almodóvar's oldest friends. She first appeared in "Matador," in 1986, and has been in three other of his movies. I asked Almodóvar what appealed to him about her. "She can be *savage*," he said. "She has an unlimited capacity to

struggle and survive. And she has a good heart.” He and Fernández hugged; Fernández is more than a head taller. She had blond hair styled to fall over her eyes, and wore a sleeveless shift that would have been appropriate at a poolside lunch at the Fontainebleau. She took a selfie with Almodóvar and began editing it on her phone with her long fingers.

“She’s retouching her teeth, her lips, her eyelashes, the line of the eye, everything—she does it all with her phone!” Almodóvar, who has little knowledge of technology, said with excitement. “She’s a great Instagrammer. It’s her religion, her creed!”

“It’s the boss’s birthday—congratulations, love,” Fernández wrote below the picture, then posted it to her two hundred thousand followers.

Large plates of tapas came. “*Que maravilla es el jamón, no?*” Almodóvar declared to the room.

Fernández complained about the lacklustre audiences in a theatre in Valladolid, where she had just been playing a comedy. Almodóvar reassured his old friend gracefully: “In Valladolid they watch all comedy as if they were watching Bergman.”

It was the night of the San Sebastián Film Festival, and the guests knew many of the nominees. The actors were eager to learn the names of the winners, and Almodóvar moved around the room, chatting and tracking the festival on various phones.

“Eduard Fernández won for best actor,” Almodóvar announced. “He was in ‘The Skin I Live In.’ ”

“He’s the one who cut off my balls,” Anaya chimed in.

“That’s not the way I would have put it,” Almodóvar joked. “How harsh that sounds!”

The scene was playful, though they all, except for Bibiana Fernández, seemed mindful of being in the presence of an eminence. Almodóvar himself looked slightly adrift, reminding me of something that Banderas had told me: “He’s happiest on the set. When he’s on the set he’s full, complete.”

Entrées of cod, snapper, and striped bass were served. The guests began singing for Almodóvar. The selections might have been chosen from the boleros, *coplas*, and Latin standards that he includes on his soundtracks. The comic actor Carlos Areces, one of the flight attendants in

“I’m So Excited,” sang “The Hills Are Alive” with a light Spanish accent.

Fernández was back on her Instagram account. “You look thin in this one,” she reassured Almodóvar, showing him a picture. She posted it with the words “Here we are side by side, like the first time.”

The singing grew more spirited. The group sang a rousing song called “Pena, Penita, Pena.” “What it’s saying is ‘Pain, pain, little pain.’ It’s marvellous. It’s like Lorca, impossible to translate. It’s pure metaphor.” The next day, a gossip blogger on *El Mundo’s* Web site noted that it was a strange song for a birthday party. But Almodóvar looked contented; a small smile appeared on his face.

He mentioned that he had been toying with one more movie treatment. It was the story of a brother and sister from a town like Calatrava who moved to Madrid, had some disappointments, grew old, then died. In his mind, the story had to do with his mother’s death. “It’s very sad,” he said. “I think in this moment after ‘Julieta’ I shouldn’t try something quite so sad.” He thought that the story about the man who is involved with a female animal seemed more pressing. “I have to feel passion,” he said. “That’s really in the front of my brain right now.”

It was close to midnight, and everyone stood up and sang “Feliz Cumpleaños” and “Las Mañanitas,” a Mexican birthday song. They clinked glasses. They finished with the torch song “Luz de Luna.” Almodóvar joined in, arms up, showing off the fine voice that the priests had admired some sixty years ago. “That’s the song that Bibi sings, naked, in ‘Kika,’” he said, remembering one of his most daring scenes.

It was clearly time to go. Word spread that there was a paparazzo on the street, so everyone said goodbye inside, kissing cheeks in the now empty restaurant. Only Bibiana Fernández lingered. “If everyone is going to leave, then I’ll leave, too,” she complained. “This isn’t a *fiesta* fiesta.” She gathered up her handbag, theatrically disappointed.

Outside, a lone man waited with a camera. Almodóvar asked him not to photograph the actors. But he himself stood gamely, his polo shirt untucked, looking flushed beneath his anemone of white hair. The paparazzo framed the director and shot—Almodóvar was the *croquis* now—and climbed back into his car. Almodóvar got into his and headed home, eager to

get back to work. ♦

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