



LOVE IS THE ANSWER: ZIYI ZHANG EMBRACES TAKESHI KANESHIRO IN ZHANG YIMOU'S HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS; (OPPOSITE PAGE) ZIYI ZHANG AS MEI. PHOTOS: BAI XIAO YAN, COURTESY SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

# PASSION PLAYS: FOREIGN FILMS RAISE EMOTIONAL STAKES

**Words: Jesse Ashlock**



Forget about the Passion of the Gibson. If you wanted real passion this year, it was foreign cinema that most often delivered the goods. A pair of fall imports from Spain and China, Pedro Almodóvar's *Bad Education* and Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers*, deal with passion at its most immolating and most dangerous. Though markedly different in aesthetics and cultural context, both rely on stylized melodrama, playing with genre to produce bigger-than-life emotional palettes. Perhaps in this ballyhooed year of the documentary, these filmmakers are searching for a different kind of truth, one that's more about feeling than fact.

The term "woman's weepie" reentered the cultural lexicon a couple of years ago thanks to *Far from Heaven*, Todd Haynes' rich re-visioning of *All That Heaven Allows*, the classic 1955 "weepie" by the godfather of cinematic melodrama, Douglas Sirk. With their pathos, myriad reversals, reliance on music and color to convey mood, and passionate but doomed love affairs, both of these current films adhere to certain conventions of maudlin women's narratives. While deeply indebted to noir, *Bad Education* combines psychological interiority, interconnected love triangles and occluded identities into an elevated modern soap opera. Meanwhile, through the guise of the traditional martial arts movie, *House of Flying Daggers* also deals with love triangles and occluded identities, exploring them with the pageantry and gallantry of the bodice-ripping Harlequin romance. "There's a very short distance between high art and trash," Sirk observed, and both these films work skillfully to split the distance between the two.

The Spanish director Almodóvar has long played this game, channeling the legacies of Sirk, Alfred Hitchcock and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (among others) into twisting, provocative melodramas that refract libertine post-Franco Spanish society like funhouse mirrors. In his recent films *All about My Mother* and *Talk to Her*, Almodóvar transcended the mere outrageousness of earlier films, achieving a truly operatic scope. With its ambitious thematic density and an intricate narrative structure like a set of Russian nesting dolls, *Bad Education* takes this evolution a step further.

Late in the film, one tormented character emerges from a noir festival to remark, "It's as if all the films were talking about us." With its jagged, blood stained opening credits accompanied by a discordant score reminiscent of Hitchcock composer Bernard Hermann, *Bad Education* signals its membership in the genus of noir from the outset – though one can be sure it will be noir on Almodóvar's terms. Set in the Madrid of 1980, the film opens to a typically colorful, bright Almodóvar interior, the office of a successful young film director Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), a trim, fastidious man who radiates aloofness as he sits at his desk perusing tabloid headlines in search of an idea for his next film. He's particularly grabbed by story of a woman at the zoo who throws herself into a pool of crocodiles, silently hugging one as the rest devour her – an anecdote that reveals Almodóvar's debt to Surrealism and presages the destructive passions that will drive the narrative.



VIEW TO A KILL: GAEL GARCÍA BERNAL (LEFT, AS ÁNGEL) AND LLUIS HOMAR (AS BERENGUER) IN THE HALL OF STATUES, IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S BAD EDUCATION. COURTESY SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

That *Bad Education* is no ordinary noir becomes quickly apparent when you meet its femme fatale, a scruffy, desperate-to-please young actor (Gael García Bernal) who claims to be Ignacio Rodríguez, a childhood friend Enrique hasn't seen in 16 years, though he's adamant about being called by his new stage name, Ángel. He brings with him a story called *The Visit*, hoping to convince Enrique to adapt it and cast him in the subsequent film. The key to *Bad Education*'s interlocking stories and the source of its title, *The Visit* tells the autobiographical tale of Ignacio and Enrique's youthful infatuation in Catholic boarding school, with a fictional second act imagining their lives as adults. Though Enrique is unable to recognize the boy he knew in the man before him, and though he finds Ignacio/Ángel's obsequiousness pathetic – "There's nothing less erotic than an actor looking for work," he sneers – he reads *The Visit* voraciously, his ego apparently flattered by the prospect of a story in which he is a character.

The second half comes first, depicting an alternate adult Ignacio, now the teetering, flamboyant, junkie transvestite Zahara (still Bernal), who beds a drunken lug after performing with her variety troupe in the small town where she grew up. Intending to rob him blind after he's passed out, she reverses course after discovering that he is the Enrique she loved as a boy. Instead she returns to the Catholic school of her youth posing as the adult sister of Ignacio Rodríguez, where she seeks to blackmail one Padre Manolo by threatening to sell her story about the priest's long-ago sexual abuse of his pupil Ignacio to a tabloid unless he pays up. "Garbage is hot," she declares.

The remaining section, set in the repressive '60s of the Franco regime, elucidates the transgressive passions that will forever bind the two boys to the priest. Here, Almodóvar comes closest to pushing melodrama towards camp. In the film's pivotal molestation scene, the angelic choirboy version of Ignacio sits alone with Father Manolo behind a stand of bamboo during a church picnic, singing "Moon River" in an eerie boy soprano, while the priest strums a guitar with an expression of haunted longing. In a Sirk-like flourish, the scene is intercut with voyeuristically lingering slow-motion shots of Ignacio's classmates diving into water, their nubile bodies slick and wet. The episode climaxes when Ignacio cries "No!" and bolts from behind the bamboo, falling to the ground, then rising to have his face split by a descending drop of blood, a breathtaking noir detail. It's one of several moments of literal melodrama in the film, in which the "melos," or music, serves to heighten the "drama."

But Almodóvar is too savvy, and too fascinated with the fierce obsessions that drive his characters, to merely vilify the priest and turn *Bad Education* into a rote anti-clerical film. In fact, he has called the priest his favorite character, because his passion burns so hot. Father Manolo is the antagonist of Ignacio and Enrique, destroying the preadolescent utopia they've discovered in the cinema and each other's bodies when he catches them together in the dormitory bathroom and subsequently expels Enrique to avoid competing for Ignacio's affections. But in the context of the story, he's just one of several characters with obsessions that drive him to use and abuse those around him.

Back in the film's present day, Goded elects to make *The Visit*, despite his growing certainty that Ángel is not who he says he is. In a scene of exquisite sexual and psychological tension, the two men swim at the director's rented villa in the country – Enrique in the nude, Ángel in briefs. After Enrique towels off, the camera swoops from him, bemusedly smoking as he reclines on a chaise, to Ángel, still underwater, standing against the wall of the pool, his features stretched with nervousness. It's an arresting image that echoes the crocodile pool and the diving schoolboys, hinting at the vast well of secrets below the surface of his character.

The director soon discovers that Ángel is indeed an imposter, as the real Ignacio has been dead for three years. But he remains silent, casting Ángel in the part of Zahara anyway and taking him as his lover in the bargain. The two men's relationship plays out against the mechanics of the film they're making, evoking the cineaste psychological drama of Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*. "He allowed me to penetrate him frequently, but only physically," Enrique dryly observes. On the final day of shooting, a wheezing Father Manolo, now known as Berenguer, arrives with a new story for Enrique, a tale of deception and passionate intrigue worthy of James M. Cain, which contains the key to the fate of Ignacio – and the identity of Ángel. Yet even when we think we understand the characters' true motivations and histories, uncertainty persists, as Almodóvar

keeps the distinction between truth and fantasy, honesty and deceit, deliberately ambiguous. Like some opulent, brilliantly plotted episode of *Days of Our Lives*, *Bad Education* continuously rotates the wheel of the story so you never get a true fix on whom its characters really are, only on the overwhelming power of their passions.

Identities are no less slippery in Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers*, though unlike *Bad Education*'s tightly woven web of duplicity, it builds a house of cards that topples under close inspection. Sumptuous spectacle is the essential ingredient, as has been the case throughout Yimou's career, the film's galloping horses, yards of brocaded silk and rusty autumn foliage rendered with a stunning palette and sweeping sense of grandeur that sometimes recalls mid-century Technicolor Western melodramas. Instead of gunplay, though, *House of Flying Daggers* offers "wuxia," the gravity-defying brand of martial arts chivalry introduced to Western audiences in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and again in Yimou's recent film *Hero*. But while the film's action and pageantry may suggest Westerns, as a historical fiction that depicts its heroine ravished time and again by male characters, it's a pure bodice ripper. Playing the seductive fugitive at the film's center, Ziyi Zhang has her garments torn to reveal milky white shoulders no fewer than five times over the course of the movie (and once more in *Hero*, for those keeping score at home).

"You can't force a woman against her will," a character advises late in the film; indeed, the tension between woman as passive subject of men's desires and active perpetrator of her own is essential to the forward momentum of *House of Flying Daggers*. The story takes place in 859 AD in the twilight of the corrupt Tang Dynasty. The rebel alliance House of Flying Daggers has been a particular annoyance to the old regime, even after the assassination of its leader. So Leo (Andy Lau) and Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro), two "captains of the country" charged with apprehending the group's new leaders, pursue a hunch that Mei, a demure blind courtesan at a local brothel, is in fact the daughter of the old leader, and hatch a plan to use her to lead them to the House of Flying Daggers.

Posing as a wealthy hedonist, Jin seeks an audience with Mei. With the other girls looking on, she performs the film's theme song while he drunkenly chimes in. The story's emotional heart appears in the song's conflation of romantic passion with the rise and fall of nations. "There is no city or nation more cherished than a beauty like this," she sings, and the rest of the film sets out to prove her point. When Jin gets out of hand, deputy Leo removes him from the brothel before receiving his own performance, this time an elaborately staged dance called "The Echo Game," thus establishing the romantic triangle among the three characters.

Eventually, Mei's cover is blown and Leo arrests her. Jin, now claiming to be a free spirit named Wind sympathetic to the Daggers' cause, puts the plan into motion by springing her from jail. As the two travel through the forest, tailed by Leo and fighting off attacks by the general's soldiers, they develop an unlikely infatuation with one another. But while Jin believes himself in control of the situation, he doesn't realize that Mei, even as she begins to fall in love with him, harbors secrets of her own. Nor does he suspect that Leo is tormented by his own desire, which he tips when he angrily warns Jin not to let the ruse become the real thing. All three characters ultimately allow romantic passion to trump country and ideology with disastrous consequences. In a visually stunning denouement, autumn turns instantaneously to winter and feet of snow tumble down in seconds as the characters wage a protracted final battle that fulfills the prophecy of Mei's song, evoking *Romeo and Juliet* in its tragic, operatic punch.

While Yimou is an astonishing visual stylist, *House of Flying Daggers* doesn't approach the nuanced characterizations and narrative sophistication of *Bad Education*, so its hyperbolic sense of melodrama becomes more amusing than moving. But it's nonetheless a sensuous, emotionally wrought antidote to most passionless Hollywood product. "Ultimately, movies are about people, regardless of genre or style," Yimou says in the film's production notes. "My concern is how people fall in love, and what we are willing to sacrifice for the sake of that love." That's a concern Almodóvar shares, no matter how differently he expresses it in art. The final, emblematic image of *Bad Education* articulates the ethos of both directors: the word "pasión" is isolated on the screen, then rapidly expands to push against its borders, as if no walls on earth could hold it in.