

Almodovar 'emotionally naked' in new introspective film

Spanish director Pedro Almodovar's new movie "Pain and Glory" about a melancholic filmmaker played by Antonio Banderas opened in cinemas across Spain on Friday, the most retrospective work in his 40-year career. The Oscar-winning writer and director behind films such as "Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown" and "Julieta" had long vowed never to publish an autobiography, but he admits he is "emotionally naked" in his 21st film which deals with the themes of love, mourning and reconciliation.

"I felt the need to provide a very introspective look, including into my darkest parts and to mix that with the brightest memories of my childhood," the 69-year-old said during an interview with Spanish public television TVE on Wednesday. The movie cuts back and forth in time as it follows the filmmaker in his twilight years reflecting on the choices he's made in life. It features scenes of a young boy discovering he is gay in a rural and deeply Catholic Spain and of two mature men who kiss each other tenderly on the mouth.

"I am master of my stories and I impose my universe with all the pride and all the arrogance that this allows. And in my universe there are two older gentlemen who kiss with passion, and after one of them returns to his life with his wife and children," Almodovar told online Spanish newspaper eldiario.es.

'My Mastroianni'

The movie stars longtime Almodovar favorite Penelope Cruz who plays the main character's young mother, a woman engulfed in sadness who lights up and sings while washing clothes in a river. Spanish actress Julieta Serrano, who appeared in his first feature film, the 1980 camp comedy "Pepi, Luci, Bom", depicts the mother when she is elderly. "I don't want you to put

anything about me in your films," Serrano's character says at one point. Almodovar picked Banderas, 58, who rose to Hollywood stardom after starring in his movies, to play his double. The actor sports Almodovar's trademark spiky white hair and bright clothes but does not imitate the director's mannerisms.

"It took me time to understand that Antonio was my most legitimate Mastroianni," Almodovar told daily El Mundo in a reference to the role of a depressed film director played by Marcello Mastroianni in Italian director Federico Fellini's "8 1/2", which won the best foreign language film Oscar in 1963. Almodovar first cast Banderas in his 1982 film "Labyrinth of Passion". He went on to give him leading roles in six other movies.

'Most sincere' movie

While reviews in Spain for Almodovar's recent movies have been mixed, this time around critics have been mostly positive about "Pain and Glory" (Dolor y Gloria). Spanish daily El Mundo said the film "achieves a level of perfection which is difficult to surpass", while online newspaper El Espanol called it Almodovar's "most sincere" movie.

Almodovar has stressed in several media interviews ahead of the film's release that it contains many fictional moments which bear no resemblance to his own history. For example, the director in the movie falls in love with a builder as a nine-year-old boy. Almodovar says this never happened to him, though he admits it could have. In the movie the director becomes hooked on heroin. Almodovar said he never touched the drug, preferring instead cocaine in his younger days. The film features a cameo appearance by Latin Grammy winner Rosalia, 25, who is being praised globally for her groundbreaking fusion of flamenco with urban and



In this file photo taken on March 12, 2019 (From left) Spanish actress Penelope Cruz, Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar, Spanish actor Antonio Banderas and Spanish actor Asier Etxeandia pose during the photocall of the film "Dolor y Gloria" (Pain and Glory) in Madrid. — AFP

electronic music. Almodovar has won two Oscars—for best foreign language film in 2000 with "All About My Mother" and for best original screenplay in 2003 with "Talk to Her". — AFP



In this handout photograph from Tolo TV taken on March 21, 2019, Afghan female singer Zahra Elham holds the trophy after she won the finale contest of the television music competition 'Afghan Star' in Kabul. — AFP

'Afghan American Idol' won by a woman for the first time

An Afghan woman has become the first to win a popular singing competition, with her victory coming as fears grow that women could lose hard-won rights if the US does a peace deal with the Taliban. Zahra Elham, in her 20s and from Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic minority, snatched first place from her male runner-up on Afghan Star — a local version of American Idol — in which hundreds of men and women have competed for 14 seasons.

"I popped the hearts of men out of their chests today," a happy Elham told the audience during the contest's finale late Thursday. "I am so so happy, I cannot even find words to express my feelings... Today, I represent all the girls of Afghanistan. Today not only Zahra Elham but all the girls in Afghanistan have won," she said amid cheers, applause and even tears from the admiring audience.

Known for her high pitch and raspy voice, she had previously said she wanted to break the grasp of male winners on the competition, first launched in 2005 and one of Afghanistan's most popular television shows. "Your win is a slap in the face of jealous Afghan men," Sonita Rasa

wrote on Zahra's Facebook page. "Hope you don't disappear after this big win and hope the situation allows you to continue to get to your dreams," Tanin, another user, wrote.

As talks between Washington and the Taliban aimed at ending the long war progress, many Afghans fear a premature US withdrawal could see the Taliban return to some semblance of power. Young women, keenly aware of how their gender was banished behind doors and beneath burkas under Taliban rule, are among the most vocal in warning they will not compromise their hard-won rights if the insurgents return.

The Taliban have given few details of what they want in Afghanistan, and it is unclear what a post-conflict government would look like — but under their strict interpretation of Islam the militants have never been in favour of women, or shows like Afghan Star. "Peace is on its way, hope the future peace has the Afghan Star contest in it," Mustafa Azizyar, the show's presenter said, after presenting the trophy. — AFP



Bring a hankie: Heartwarming 'Dumbo' may also bring tears

Bring a hankie to the new movie version of Disney's flying elephant tale "Dumbo" because it may be a little dark for some people. The movie, a live-action remake of the 1941 animated Disney classic, is centered on a circus baby elephant who is ridiculed for having huge ears and, whose mother, like in the original, is forcibly removed.

"That is still very much the launching point for our story," actor Colin Farrell, who plays the father of two children who adopt Dumbo, told reporters on Thursday at the London premiere of the film. "They both deal with topics and issues that children and families and grown-ups face in the world every day - loss, grief, guilt, shame, all those things. But at the same time, it's done in the context of making it accessible to children, and not too much to bear," Farrell added.

Danny DeVito, who plays circus owner Max Medici, warned that the film was a tearjerker. "You look at that baby (elephant) and it's just ... you melt. When you see this movie, bring a Kleenex. But it's a good movie, it's funny and happy," he said. "Dumbo," directed by Tim Burton, arrives in movie theaters worldwide starting next Wednesday. — Reuters

Does #nomakeup trend help women or is it bare-faced cheek?

From the skies to the stage, women are taking a stand for equality by wiping off their make-up, sparking a bare-faced trend that won rising numbers of followers globally but also triggered vocal defenders of the benefits of cosmetics. An online #nomakeup campaign dates back about three years to when US singer Alicia Keys vowed not to wear make-up anymore but it has gained momentum this year with other celebrities and industries following suit.



In this file photo musician Alicia Keys arrives at the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards in New York. — Reuters

British singer Jess Glynne made headlines in February when she took off her make-up during a Brit Awards performance while singing "Thursday", a song about not wanting to wear makeup. Airlines Virgin Atlantic and Aer Lingus this month updated guidelines stating air hostesses no longer had to wear make-up. A spokeswoman from Virgin Atlantic said the move was made to reflect a change in the aviation industry, where highly coiffured female hostesses were once nicknamed trolley dollies, and Aer Lingus said it reflected "changing dress norms".

University student Yim Ji-su helped spark a debate in February about daily sexism in beauty-obsessed South Korea by ditching her make-up and shaving her hair into a buzz cut. Abi Wright, founder of UK-based Inspiring Margot, a company working to build women's confidence in the workplace, said wearing make-up should be a choice, not an expectation. "If, as women, we're expected to wear make-up then that simply says our appearance is more important than our skills and abilities," Wright told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "It highlights yet again that our society associates a woman's worth by appearance and nothing more."

Laws on dress

In Britain, discrimination at work over make-up or clothing is illegal under the Equality Act 2010 but this law has come under scrutiny since a 2016 campaign by Nicola Thorp who was sent home from work without pay for refusing to wear high heels. This prompted a parliamentary inquiry that led to guidance setting out how the law might apply when an employer required female staff to wear high heels, make-up, or revealing clothing.

The United States has similar laws with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission stating standards can be different for men and women as long as it is generally consistent but there has not been many challenges to sex-based employee dress codes. The trend to go bare-faced has been picked up by the global cosmetics industry, which was worth at least \$48.3 billion last year, according to market research group Mintel.

New cosmetics companies like Glossier Inc, which was valued at over \$1 billion this week, are offering products that cater to various skin tones and emphasize a natural "no-makeup" look. "No make-up is really a symbol of being empowered and being comfortable in your own skin, not having to hide behind something," said British make-up artist Lee Pycroft. "It's positive because it's taking away the association that women have to look a certain way to fill a certain role," said Pycroft, who has worked with celebrities like actresses Anne Hathaway and Laura Linney and supermodel Elle Macpherson. — Reuters

GOT's Emilia Clarke reveals near-fatal brain aneurysms

"Game of Thrones" star Emilia Clarke suffered two nearly fatal brain aneurysms in the early years of filming the hit series, she said in an essay published Thursday. The British actress—who plays Daenerys Targaryen on the blockbuster show about to enter its final season—wrote that the first aneurysm rupture struck while she was at the gym in February 2011, just after filming the first season.

"At some level, I knew what was happening: my brain was damaged," the 32-year-old wrote in The New Yorker magazine in her piece entitled "A Battle For My Life." "For a few moments, I tried to will away the pain and the nausea," she continued. "To keep my memory alive, I tried to recall, among other things, some lines from 'Game of Thrones.'" Clarke was rushed to the hospital and diagnosed with a subarachnoid hemorrhage—a form of stroke triggered by bleeding into areas that surround the brain, which kills about one third of the patients it strikes.



In this file photo taken on February 25, 2019 British actress Emilia Clarke attends the 2019 Vanity Fair Oscar Party following the 91st Academy Awards at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills. — AFP

She was 24 at the time of her first brain surgery, and said the recovery period in which she could not even recall her own name—a condition called aphasia—gave her "a sense of doom." "In my worst moments, I wanted to pull the plug. I asked the medical staff to let me die," Clarke said. "My job—my entire dream of what my life would be—centered on language, on communication. Without that, I was lost."

The condition passed and Clarke left the hospital one month after her admission—but doctors had found she had a second aneurysm that could rupture at any moment. "Even before we began filming Season 2, I was deeply unsure of myself. I was often so woozy, so weak, that I thought I was going to die," Clarke wrote, saying she took morphine between interviews while promoting the acclaimed show.

During a routine brain scan doctors found her growth had doubled in size and decided to operate—a seemingly simple procedure that resulted in major complications and another month in the hospital. Today, Clarke says she has "healed beyond my most unreasonable hopes," and helped develop a charity to offer treatment to patients recovering from stroke and brain injuries. "There is something gratifying, and beyond lucky, about coming to the end of 'Thrones,'" Clarke wrote. "I'm so happy to be here to see the end of this story and the beginning of whatever comes next." — AFP