

Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas) (15) Spain/France 2021

3 April 2023

DIRECTORS: **Pedro Almodóvar**

(Spanish with English subtitles) Running time: 123 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Penélope Cruz** (Janis), **Milena Smit** (Ana), **Israel Elejalde** (Arturo), **Aitana Sánchez-Gijón** (Teresa). **Rosy de Palma** (Elena), **Julieta Serrano** (Brigida).

SCREENPLAY: **Pedro Almodóvar**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **José Luis Alcaine**. EDITING: **Teresa Font**. MUSIC: **Alberto Iglesias**.

Parallel Mothers is Almodóvar's twenty-fourth feature and seventh with Penélope Cruz, who can well and truly be said to have replaced his former muse, Carmen Maura. It is, by my reckoning, the fourth of his films we have shown as a Society, but the first since *Volver*, in the 2007/08 season. I mention this to reflect not just on how long the Spanish director has been with us, but also on the consistent quality of his work.

Madres paralelas revisits many of Almodóvar's favourite themes: a lost child (*All about My Mother*; *Julieta*), the shadow of a malign national past (*Bad Education*), doubling (*Talk to Her*), and same sex relationships (*Law of Desire*; *Pain and Glory*). As in other mature works, he shadows a foreground storyline with a background one, which sheds light on the first.

The through-line of the film is Janis's project to photograph the exhumation of Civil War victims from a mass grave outside her home village. Her accessory in this is Arturo, a forensic archaeologist, whose organisation might provide the backing. The Civil War thus enters Almodóvar's work for the first time, a nod to the reality that there are a great many unlaidd ghosts in Spain's collective memory.

Onto this quasi-documentary material he then maps, as so often, the messiness of human relationships. Arturo's wife has cancer and he and Janis have a brief affair; Janis falls pregnant and decides to keep the baby against his wishes; Janis meets Ana in hospital and they form a bond; Janis doubts her child is actually hers, and then runs into Ana, whose baby has suffered a crib death. Were the infants mixed up at the maternity ward, and what is Janis to do about it? Deceit, DNA tests and passion ensue, and before long Janis becomes aware of an irreconcilable gulf between her professional ideals and private deeds.

Any one of the above plot devices might be accused of soap operatic excess, but one after the other? And yet Almodóvar's skill has always been (more or less) to put past us material others might make risible and melodramatic. He does it, in a word, through conviction. He works with his cast to deliver something truthful in their performance, and he works with the best. Some of his collaborators - composer Alberto Iglesias and cinematographer José Luis Alcaine - have been with him for decades, and his own art school eye takes care over every aspect of mise en scène, from the colours on the walls, to the toaster on the kitchen worktop.

Truth aside, though, the jaw-dropping moment is a *sine qua non* of an Almodóvar film - remember the rape via silent movie in *Talk to Her*? So if you feel your own metaphorical mandible lower just a tad, you are probably meant to. After all, what is wrong with finding new vehicles for your ideas, while continuing to entertain your fans? And anyway, as the crane shot contemplates the new community of friends at the film's conclusion, reconciled with the past and their own life choices, do we not pause at having been held rapt for so long without once being bored?

David Clare