

Critique

Pradip Biswas

The Room Next Door: Almodovar's Obsession with Death



“There are lots of ways to live inside a tragedy.” – Pedro Almodovar

Pedro Almodovar likes to play with serious to light-weight themes in his films. *The Room Next Door*, winner of Golden Lion, 81st Venice film festival, mirrors the defiant spirit of its main characters in the filmmaking itself. It is punched with death or obsession of death. A little uneasy at first sight but it is real McCoy. The film is of 110 min duration.

Red rubric is that Pedro Almodóvar has dealt with the subject of death throughout his career. It is natural instinct; he is at his best when he tackles complexities and doubts with death. What lies in death indeed!! Be it as an inciting incident in *All About My Mother*, a looming panic in *Talk to Her*, or a cheeky provocation in *Matador*; these highlight by an existential darkness that has always lurked behind the vibrant, liquid surfaces of his films. On closing on the impermanence of human existence in the euthanasia drama *The Room Next Door* doesn't indicate resignation to a “late period” style so much visible in Almodóvar's formidable body of work.

The director takes to the Spanish auteur's adaptation of Sigrid Nunez's 2020 novel *What Are You Going Through* begins with Julianne Moore's Ingrid signing copies of her new book, *On Sudden Deaths*, expressing in bulk as her attempt to indulge

in the mystery of her subject. But not long into *The Room Next Door*, she just finds that she must grapple with a non-spontaneous end. And the rare time that she spends sitting with the inevitability of death forces a reckoning for Ingrid that must be corporeal and emotional rather than simply intellectual or otherwise. Almodóvar does the same from behind the camera as he explores the dead end of life on its distinct terms; it does not just as part of an Eros-Thanatos dichotomy that looks at death as a dark undergirding to sexual passion or tenacity for the same.

It can be said *The Room Next Door* displays no obvious stand-in for the director to distill his evolving outlook into a palatable thesis or anti-thesis. In this deft two-hander between the tremendous talents of Swinton and Moore, their characters have ample opportunities to justify and rationalize their perspectives as crystal ball. Moore's Ingrid has such a remote relationship with death that she percolates it into her writing to avoid grappling with its complexities of life and situations; Swinton's Martha, on the other hand, understands it on a murky level thanks to her many years spent as a war correspondent.

The enigma continues. Almodóvar, ever the non-judgmental syndic, declares neither approach to be right or wrong. These personal philosophies are simply ways of coping with the inevitable end that waits for us all. Ingrid and Martha have shared plenty over the years of their friendship, including a charismatic lover in academic Damian (John Turturro), that unites them. The film has a contra side; but their departure when it comes to border of death becomes harder to put aside as Martha's cancer progresses to horrid point.

Gradually Almodovar introduces some elements stranger than fiction. We see strange events precipitate the bonds of sisterhood in Almodóvar's film, and *The Room Next Door* is no exception. The drama is pulled to staring down death; Martha makes an unusual request to Ingrid, who at this point, is closer to an acquaintance than a friend. She illegally collects a euthanasia pill and intends to slip peacefully into death. The intention isn't to implicate Ingrid in her euthanasia by her administering the medicine: or witness the passage. Instead, in queer way, Martha simply advances for the comfort, knowing that she has a loving presence in an adjacent room.

Almodovar impels Ingrid initially to resist participation, mostly on philosophical grounds; also because, it involves serving as a companion for an unwanted amount of time at a house in upstate New York. Martha eventually gathers Ingrid's support by explaining her struggle in literary and poetic terms. Interestingly, she's trapped inside the societal framing of cancer as a "fight" between a patient and the disease. Unfortunately, this ultimately casts the final result as a test of an individual's mettle. Ingrid's refusal to bow to this narrative makes her a classic Almodóvar taboo buster, although in death rather than life.

The Room Next Door highlights that defiant bat and spirit in the filmmaking itself. One of the key ways in which Almodóvar retards making the subject feel like resignation to an imminent end is by using the project to break new artistic ground. Most obviously, the film marks his first full English-

language feature, but he employes a new and savvy visual vocabulary as well. The film gets fortified in passionate way.

Though the delicate dance around Ingrid's looming decision lends itself to the Sirkian melodrama that Almodóvar effortlessly introduces forcefully, the more somber subject matter leads him to work in a register closer to Ingmar Bergman's intimate chamber piece. As the women strive to communicate across a divide, his gaze lingers on pointed silences and dusky gestures. Given the abundant nuances that Moore and Swinton can pack into a single facial contortion, the camera has no problem picking up those graceful notes. It is more of a dapper courage of the director to have his way. Together, the actresses' harmonizing illuminates the film's subversive observation that only fear of death can help mend a frayed friendship.

But while a spiritual connection between film and filmmaker is always evident across *The Room Next Door*, some signs of dissonance appear. A bit of individual emotion feels lost in translation from Almodóvar's native tongue Spanish-language scripts. We find a loss of thematic loss in the process. The passive psychodrama often appears on the surface level rather than penetrating deep into the souls of the characters. A thick attempt to connect the micro-scale passing of Martha to the macro-level destruction of the planet by climate change falls flat and cries out!!! Often the film seems contrived; it has no genuine link with room next door!!! Riddle is there; it is the viewers who have to explore it as mariners!!

Finally, it's undoubtedly illuminating to have a filmmaker of Almodóvar's stature and pedigree trying to see a beginning in the end. This is against his instinct. Now that he's finally broken the seal on working in English after a series of false starts, perhaps a generous benefactor can revive his long-developing project *A Manual for Cleaning Women* with Cate Blanchett.

It may be a fitting legacy for *The Room Next Door* to generate more life even as it circles the theme of death.