DVD Select: Down with the nominations - long live Aldomovar!

by Robert J. Hawkins

Not to disparage the five foreign-language films nominated for Oscars, but Academy members, what were you thinking?

How did you exclude Pedro Aldomovar's "Volver"? More curious still, how did you nominate Penelope Cruz for best actress for her dominant role in the film, then neglect to nominate the film?

By some perverted logic, did voters decide that the dozens of awards and nominations received by the film around the world were plenty? You know, share the wealth with the less fortunate.

'VOLVER' - Penelope Cruz has been nominated for best actress for her role in the film 'Volver,' yet the film itself hasn't gathered any notice. CNS Photo courtesy of Emilio Pereda and Paola Ardizzoni.It is just mind-boggling.

Fans of the iconoclastic Aldomovar have some comfort this week, and perhaps a way to cast their vote with their pocketbook.

Sony Pictures is releasing "Viva Pedro" (4 stars), a box set with eight wonderful films by Aldomovar, and a ninth disc with three insightful documentaries on the director, his films and his life.

While the collection skews toward his most recent films and is more than half the 15 films to Aldomovar's credit, the collection does not include "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" nor "High Heels." Deal with it. That's why you have a Netflix account.

Ah, but what the box does contain, in chronological order:

"Matador" (1986) An ex-matador (Nacho Martinez) and a female lawyer (Assumpta Serna) discover a mutual attraction for violence. Caught between this attraction is the young bullfighting student the lawyer is hired to defend (Antonio Banderas) on murder charges.

"Law of Desire" (1987) A little-seen nor appreciated gem about a gay movie director, his man-hating transsexual sibling and the two men the director loves. Stars Antonio Banderas, Eusebio Poncela, Carmen

Maura and Miguel Molina.

"Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown" (1988) In this quirky and manic comedy, the lives of three women involved with the same man converge. Yes, Antonio Banderas is in this one, too - with Carmen Maura, Julieta Serrano and Maria Barranco.

"The Flower of My Secret" (1995) In this romantic comedy, Leo (Marisa Paredes) is a romance novelist in a loveless marriage and fresh out of inspiration until she crosses paths with the tough guy Angel (Juan Echanove) and an affair blossoms.

"Live Flesh" (1997) Police beak up a fight between Victor (Liberto Rabal) and Elena (Francesca Neri), and when Victor's gun goes off and a cop is paralyzed, he's wrongfully sent to prison. David the cop (Javier Bardem) and Elena get married, but Victor's not done with them yet. (Penelope Cruz has her first of three roles in Aldomovar films in "Live Flesh.")

"All About My Mother" (1999) Aldomovar wins Best Foreign Film Oscar for this tale of strong women. Manuela (Cecilia Roth) loses her only son in a tragic accident. Agrado (Antonia San Juan), a transvestite, helps Manuela hunt for the boy's father, also a transvestite named Lola (Toni Canto). Along the way, they befriend a pregnant nun (Penelope Cruz) and an aging lesbian actress Huma (Marisa Paredes). It is not as strange as it sounds.

"Talk to Her" (2002) A beautiful dance student and a female matador both lie in comas at a clinic where the two men devoted to their care and recovery develop an unusual bond. (Aldomovar won an Oscar for best screenplay written directly for a film. He was nominated for best director.)

"Bad Education" (2004) Enrique (Fele Martinez), a filmmaker, is visited by a man claiming to be his old school chum. He arrives with a script in hand detailing the abuse the boys experienced at the hands of the priests who ran the school. The tale inspires Enrique's next film. He discovers a wildly different story when the priest in question appears and gives his version of events. Gael Garcia Bernal also stars.

The ninth disc contains several features - the analytical "Deconstructing Pedro," the biographical "Viva Pedro" and the anecdotal "Experiencing Aldomovar." Among those interviewed extensively are Aldomovar's producer and brother Augustin Aldomovar, his fiercely loyal executive producer Esther Garcia, the program director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center Richard Pena and longtime Aldomovar cast members Carmen Maura and Javier Camara.

As you can probably tell, Aldomovar's subject matter is strictly for adults - a few, like "Bad Education," have

received the NC-17 rating. He tackles topics like death, sex, guilt and homosexuality in a straightforward way that puts them comfortably in the tapestry of life. Even the religious in his films are characters, not vehicles for commentary on religion.

In a word, Aldomovar's film world is so natural you'll hardly notice that it isn't your own. Until you start to look around at your own world with fresh Aldomovar eyes.

Viva, Pedro!

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Flyboys" (MGM, 2 stars) The story of young American pilots who early on came to the aid of France in World War I is told in detail-conscious manner but overshadowed by other war films this year. Directed by Tony Bill and starring a largely unknown cast: James Franco, Scott Hazell, Mac McDonald and Philip Winchester, among them.

"Catch A Fire" (Universal, 2 stars) Again a film overshadowed by the likes of "Blood Diamond." This one involves terrorism in apartheid-era South Africa. Stars Tim Robbins and Derek Luke.

"Open Season" (Sony, 2 stars) Utterly graceless computer-animated tale of a domesticated bear (voiced by Martin Lawrence) and his frantic sidekick, a one-antler deer (Ashton Kutcher) who lead a revolt of the woodland creatures against hunters. All hunters are slobs, by the way, as I'm sure the rabid gun-promoters of the NRA have pointed out by now. It's just pretty bad.

"Unknown" (Genius Productions, 2 stars) Interesting situation: five men awake in a locked chemical warehouse with no memory of who they are or how they got there. But some of them are hostages and some are captors. Somebody needs to figure out who is who before the really bad guys show up. Stars include James Caviezel, Greg Kinnear, Bridget Moynahan, Joe Pantoliano and Berry Pepper. A perfect DVD mystery-thriller.

"The Motel" (Palm Pictures, 2 1/2 stars) Ernest Chin (Jeffrey Chyau) is 13, stuck in his family's dingy hourly-rate motel, streaking toward puberty and dreaming about 15-year-old Christine (Samantha Futerman). Life looks like it is headed for teen hell until the mysterious Sam (Sung Kang) checks in and takes Ernest under his wing and sends him toward manhood.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season six of "Dallas"; season two of "The Big Valley"; "Benny Hill: Complete and Unadulterated, Set 6: The Hill's Angels Years (1986-1989)."

FROM THE VAULT

"The Silence of the Lambs Collector's Edition" (MGM, 2 discs) The classic psychological horror tale gets the special "extras" treatment. Included are a two-part feature "From Page to Screen," interviews with director Jonathan Demme and star Jodie Foster and more.

Two box sets are clearly designed for Valentines Day gifting:

"Girls' Night In Collection" (Paramount) Five chick-flick titles include: "Forces of Nature," "What Women Want," "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days," "Win A Date with Tad Hamilton" and "Just Like Heaven." Just add a quart of chocolate ice cream and a cat on your lap and - heaven.

"Matthew McConaughey Collection" (Paramount) ironically, three of his worst films add up to lots of female oohs and aahs. In the box: Yet, again (with Kate Hudson) "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days," the arrested development comedy (with Sarah Jessica Parker) "Failure to Launch" and the action-thriller (with Penelope Cruz) "Sahara."

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the $1 bin

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