

HYPE

FLARE WAS THERE SPECIAL

Latin love

Forget Tom, Matthew and Orlando;
Penélope Cruz's main man is
director Pedro Almodóvar

Penélope Cruz is finally getting some R-E-S-P-E-C-T in Hollywood. She's been called "sultry," "beguiling" and, of course, the most condescending of terms—"exotic"—for years by North American film critics but, lately, the actor is getting labelled with something much more satisfying: "Oscar contender." And with good reason. Anyone who has seen the Madrid native's latest flick, *Volver*—directed by Pedro Almodóvar, known as Spain's own Scorsese—can't help but notice that Cruz has a good chance of winning at this year's Academy Awards.

That's not to say it'll be easy. Cruz's presumed competition in the best-actress category will be filled with some pretty fierce talent, including Kate Winslet (*Little Children*), Meryl Streep (*The Devil Wears Prada*), Annette Bening (*Running with Scissors*) and Helen Mirren (*The Queen*). Still, the odds are looking good for Cruz. Simply put, her performance in *Volver* is the best of her 14 years in film. Part of the reason why, she tells me while en route to the film's Toronto International Film Festival premiere, is simply the fact that she respects her character. *Really* respects her.

"I love this woman," she says of her role as Raimunda, a hotter-than-jalapenos, hard-done-by mother who has to deal with a family tragedy in addition to a troubled husband. "She's a fighter like many women in her situation. I think this character is an homage to women who refuse to be victims."

By contrast, Cruz has never played the victim in her own personal life—even though the flaparazzi have speculated on the many reported rocky relation-

ships she's had with leading men such as Tom Cruise, Matthew McConaughey, Adrien Brody and, most recently, Orlando Bloom. Somehow, Cruz manages to keep her two Manolo'd feet planted firmly on the ground. But she credits that to not playing the fame game.

"Being yourself? No one can do that for you," she says in a determined huff. "You must have the integrity to respect yourself, and that's not easy. Being authentic is about things you cannot buy. It's the biggest challenge for every human being and you have to work for it. I don't do [Hollywood] parties and the frivolous sides of the film industry. I'm [busy] working."

And working it, according to Cruz, sometimes means facing your biggest vulnerabilities head-on. "I still feel nervous at the beginning of a movie. The day before we [filmed *Volver*], I was crying in my bedroom. It terrified me, but I think this fear generates respect for the work I have to do."

One thing's for certain: Cruz quickly gained the respect of Almodóvar, who, like Cruz, is known for the passion he injects into each of his films. Almodóvar's vibrant, plot-crossed films, such as *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and the Oscar-winning *All About My Mother*, are jam-packed with the director's feverish attention to detail.

In the case of *Volver*, that attention extended to wardrobe as well. "We did many tests. Pedro, with Bina [Daigeler, *Volver's* costume designer], chose every single thing I wore in this film and I was very happy with it," Cruz says. "All the clothes I wore were really cheap—things that were \$3 or \$5. [Almodóvar wanted

the look to be very pre-fame Sophia Loren—her glamorous pre-glamour days, when she resembled a Neapolitan fish seller.] Except for a couple of pieces, like the Marc Jacobs jacket I have on while I am singing, and one black Dolce & Gabbana dress."

Besides the costumes, Cruz also cites Almodóvar as one of the few male directors in tune with the opposite sex. "He specializes in filming women. He knows the female universe so well. He loves women and knows what we feel."

What's sure to fascinate viewers is where Cruz's career is headed. Besides another star turn, alongside Adrien Brody, in *Manolete* (an upcoming film about one of Spain's most famous matadors), she is also working on producing and directing two English-language films. With all this in mind, it's easy to see why Hollywood is ready to give her the recognition she deserves. —Elio Iannacci



Oscar worthy: Cruz in Oscar de la Renta at this year's Toronto International Film Festival

GEORGE PIMENTEL