

## Antonio Banderas' "SKIN" Flick

Written by Michael Gingold

Wednesday, 12 October 2011 14:06

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Mad doctors have been a staple of horror cinema since its earliest days, and even with all the variations who have stitched and sutured their way across the screen, there's never been one quite like Dr. Robert Ledgard, played by Antonio Banderas in Pedro Almodóvar's *THE SKIN I LIVE IN*. As the film nears its U.S. release this Friday from Sony Pictures Classics, Fango spoke to Banderas about slipping into *SKIN*.

In the movie, which begins its run in New York and LA and expands from there, Dr. Ledgard lives in a lavish mansion with two female companions: his housekeeper Marilia (played by Almodóvar film veteran Marisa Paredes) and a mysterious young woman named Vera (Elena Anaya), who seems alternately to be Dr. Ledgard's prisoner and his lover. Their relationship is in fact deeper—and far more perverse—than that, and is gradually revealed as the scenario explores ever-darker depths of surgical madness. It's a return to thriller territory for Almodóvar and Banderas, another frequent collaborator with the director, who first teamed up on 1986's twisted psychodrama *MATADOR*.

**FANGORIA:** *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* brings you full circle with Almodóvar. You starred in his first thriller, *MATADOR*, and this is his first film in that genre since then.

**ANTONIO BANDERAS:** Yeah, it's been quite a trip, all these years. We did continue seeing each other as friends for the 22 years since *TIE ME UP! TIE ME DOWN!*, which is the last one we did, and it was almost like nothing happened in between. It was like yesterday we finished the other movie. The whole thing has been very interesting.



**FANG:** Was there a reason you didn't collaborate for so long?

**BANDERAS:** Well, a couple of times he contacted me with the possibility of working together again, but it was just timing. I was signed for Hollywood pictures two, sometimes three years in advance, and it was practically impossible to get out of those contracts, so that was one of the reasons. In fact, he first talked to me about THE SKIN I LIVE IN in 2002, I believe it was, at the Cannes Film Festival. But for whatever reason, he decided to go first with other movies like VOLVER or BROKEN EMBRACES, but meanwhile, he was putting together this story. I was in New York, actually, doing a workshop for [the Broadway revival of] ZORBA, and suddenly he called me and said, "It's about time." And I said, "Yeah, it is!" So we got together and started working again.

**FANG:** When you first discussed it all those years back, how much of the plot did he tell you?

**BANDERAS:** What he did was just tell me the story of MYGALE [TARANTULA], the book which inspired him to do the movie. But when he called me again after all those years, he said, "Forget about MYGALE; I don't know if you have read the novel or not. That was a source of inspiration for me, but the script really doesn't have anything to do with it now, except the fundamental premise. I've reinvented the entire story in a totally different way; in fact, I'm not going to do it linear, but I'm going to use time in a way that is absolutely different from what is done in the novel." And when I read the script, it was quite stunning. I thought the cinematic exercise he was trying was just incredible.

**FANG:** Did you ever wind up reading the book?

**BANDERAS:** No, because Pedro said to me, "I prefer that you don't get distracted by what the novel is all about. We're going to work your character exactly the way I created him, and if you read the book, it's probably going to give you information we're not going to use. Just concentrate on what we have in front of us."

**FANG:** Dr. Ledgard has been compared by some people to Dr. Frankenstein. Was that something you thought about when you approached the role?

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**BANDERAS:** Yeah, of course, there's something of that in him, because the movie has a little touch of science fiction. Obviously you cannot do what he does today; it might happen sometime 30 or 40 years from now, but it is not possible in our era. So there's that element, but then the story goes in different directions, where he has a kind of love for his creation. By the end of the movie, it seems Dr. Ledgard is actually falling for Vera somehow, though I never felt that way when we were performing it; I thought it was more like he's falling for himself, he's falling for his masterpiece. And he eventually receives the punishment he should receive.

**FANG:** Indeed, one of the interesting things about *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* is that as perverse as it gets, it's also ultimately a very moral film. Everybody kind of gets what they deserve, in one way or another.

**BANDERAS:** It is, and it's also a reflection of what Pedro always has been interested in, which is passion in a relationship between two people—and when that passion crosses the line to psychopathy or beyond normal morality, which is a very thin line. It happens also in *TIE ME UP! TIE ME DOWN!*, which is very similar because the character in that film is a victim at the beginning, and then they both kind of recognize themselves as kindred spirits, outcasts, and in the end they adapt together. But in this movie that's impossible, because my character is ultimately a monster.



**FANG:** How did you develop that complex onscreen relationship with Elena Anaya?

**BANDERAS:** We worked hard. Pedro called us about two months prior to when we started shooting the movie—which is very unusual—and we spent a lot of time together rehearsing at his house in Madrid. We started with this group of three, and eventually some of the other actors came too, and we worked together from the point of view of, "Let's see how the scenes

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play." And as we got into it, the script went through some transformations, because Pedro was actually rehearsing himself, too. His whole tendency is to clean the script of words as much as possible; he wants to tell a story visually, and feels it should be done using the minimum of verbal expressions, and go for images. With Elena, we basically talked a lot, rehearsed a lot and started getting a feel for our bodies and for the story itself.

At the same time, I tried not to judge my character from a moral point of view. Pedro at some point said to me, "You should behave almost like a family doctor. Because for him, it's so normal that you should never wink to the audience, in terms of saying, "I know that I am playing a monster." So I just detached from that, and went for things that were very precise in the moment we were doing it. Minimal details, whether it was a little movement of the hands or a facial expression.

I used to joke to Pedro and say to him, "You're becoming Japanese, man." Many people have said that this movie is a leap in his career, that he's going to different territory, and I actually think the opposite way. I think this is more Almodóvar than Almodóvar. Pedro of course knows what the crowds love about him, and he could easily just put together movies that are going to please that. But he hasn't become a crowdpleaser. He is still on a search, exploring, investigating, turning the wheel a little bit more in his style, which is nothing more than eclecticism. He just draws from everything. That's what I remember about him from the '80s, and he hasn't changed. What he has done is just perfect his own style, to something more austere, more minimalist and cleaner.

**FANG:** THE SKIN I LIVE IN has gotten very diverse reactions so far, with strong opinions on both sides. How have you dealt with those responses?

**BANDERAS:** We are very happy with the reception by the people so far and by the audience at the Cannes Film Festival, for example. We got 10 minutes of applause there, an ovation from the entire theater. Basically, 85 percent of the reviews have been pretty good. I don't know how all audiences are going to react, but I think the Spanish audience knows Pedro very well, and that people in general are going to have a lot of interest.

**FANG:** Outside of SKIN I LIVE IN and MATADOR, you've done very few films that can be classified as horror; INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE is pretty much the only one. Is the genre something you'd like to explore further in future films?

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**BANDERAS:** Yeah, but I don't know if it's going to happen. It's not something that I'm actually searching for—horror movies in the traditional sense. I do like to see them; I'm a good spectator for those types of movies. But then, I don't actually see *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* that way. What Pedro is trying to say in this film is something different. Yes, you can say it's horror, but there are no "boo"s in it.

*Read more comments from Banderas, as well as Almodóvar and Anaya, on *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* in Fango #307, on sale now.*