

Film Review: Movie master's reflective study of ageing film director low on energy in 'Pain and Glory'



CANNES: One of the most arresting qualities of movie masters such as Pedro Almodovar and Emir Kusturica is their boundless energy. But lose it, and film fans soon notice something is amiss.

While Serbian legend Kusturica still manages to keep his cinema bubbling with life, Spain's Almodovar – pushing 70 years old and somewhat bogged down by physical ailments – appears to have taken his foot of the pedal in his latest outing, “Pain and Glory.”

The drama, about a film director reflecting on the choices he has made in life as past and present come crashing down around him, competed for the Cannes Palme d'Or and won best actor award for its hero, Antonio Banderas. The Spanish star is an alter ego of Almodovar himself – much like Indian actor Soumitra Chatterjee was of Satyajit Ray.

“Pain and Glory” is a vaguely disguised autobiography of Almodovar, revealing the anxieties rather than glories of the auteur’s chequered career.

His earlier works, such as “All About My Mother,” “Volver” and “Julieta,” were fantastic studies of Spanish society narrated with unbelievable vigor. Who can forget the opening scene of “Volver” in which dozens of widows, including Penelope Cruz’s character, are seen cleaning their husbands’ graves on a windswept morning?

“Pain and Glory” lacks this dynamism and is mostly ruminative.

Banderas plays film director, Salvador Mallo, a step-down role from his usual dashing screen image. Mallo has not made any movies for years but has enough money to lead a comfortable life surrounded by expensive artefacts.

However, he suffers with depression and worries about his headaches, back pain and a tendency to choke on his food. But a chance meeting with old acting friend Zulema (Cecilia Roth), leads Mallo to get in touch again with film star, Alberto Crespo (Asier Etxeandia), after the two had fallen out during a shoot.

When Crespo introduces Mallo to heroin, he remembers an old script titled “Addiction” and asks Crespo to perform it on stage. In doing so, Mallo opens the curtain on a new life.

In a way, “Pain and Glory” talks about how to come to terms with death, but it is also witty and about lovers and mothers.

Almodovar is such a master craftsman that he does not allow his work to sink into self-indulgence. It is a movie within a movie, and a dream that leads to another.

Most importantly, Almodovar could not have found a better actor than Banderas, who transforms splendidly into Mallo.
