

The Room Next Door (2024)

Visually provoking and existentially confronting, Pedro Almodóvar's English-language debut, *The Room Next Door* (2024), is a quiet and perhaps comforting reminder that we are all creeping towards the end.

Established in both life and career, Ingrid (Julianne Moore) is decidedly comfortable. She tours her latest book – a meditation on death – around NYC's opulent bookstores with a graciousness only achieved through rigid self-certainty. But much to everyone's dismay, life is rarely comfortable, and it is *certainly* not certain. A chance encounter alerts Ingrid to the terminal illness of her long-lost friend, Martha (Tilda Swinton). What ensues is an odd dance, a push and pull between life and death as each woman grapples with their understanding of mortality.

Almodóvar's past works, think *Julieta* (2016) and *Volver* (2006), forefront human connection and emphasise the transience of identity. *The Room Next Door* is perhaps the pinnacle of these motifs. As Martha endures gruelling rounds of chemotherapy, she realises that losing her identity, becoming unrecognisable to herself and those she loves, is a fate worse than death. The solution? A euthanasia pill, an Edward Hopper-esque country home, and a reluctant but accepting Ingrid for company.

The stage is set for a film that promises depth in both premise and character, yet, oddly, it seems intent on keeping us at arm's length. A robotic, almost formulaic quality permeates the dialogue, with the first act serving as a retrospective of sorts, laden with unnatural and exhaustive exposition. The phrase "show, don't tell" appears to be unheard of. The film finds its feet later when Ingrid and Martha are afforded moments to simply exist in the other's presence. Moore and Swinton both excel despite, and perhaps in light of, the material.

It is clear Almodóvar wants to say something, something about life or, more pertinently, about death – that perhaps at the right time, death can be a comfort. There are moments of dialogue so touching and poetic they pop out and smack you across the face, but their sting is yet to fade before we are back to the clumsy standard. The emotional distance established is simply too great to bridge, a vacuum in which these more poignant moments remain scattered and only half realised.

These transgressions are somewhat soothed by the sheer beauty and obvious love Almodóvar packs into every frame. The Spanish Director is known to have dabbled in a melodrama or two, and *The Room Next Door* is littered with the genre's stylistic traits. Tangerine hues soak Manhattan's snow-flecked skyline, the spectacle framed by Martha's broad apartment window. Almodóvar's imagery, never dull even in the face of death, reads as a direct and loving nod to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955).

With so much to celebrate in both premise and appearance, *The Room Next Door*'s stubborn detachment makes for frustrating viewing. Perhaps Almodóvar set out to placate our fears

of death, but somewhere along the way, he shot past placation and into numbness. Is this better than fear? I fear not.