

This is his 'Country' now

Spain's Javier Bardem anchors two films, and could have an Academy Award in his sights

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Actor Javier Bardem is used to accolades. He has enough Goyas — the Spanish Oscar — to serve as legs for a coffee table. And he has been showered with attention since bursting onto the international scene with "Before Night Falls" in 2000.

Now he has turned blood cold as a relentless assassin in the Coen brothers drama "No Country for Old Men" while warming hearts in the romance "Love in the Time of Cholera," a decades-spanning adaptation of the Gabriel Garcia Marquez masterpiece. Earlier this year, he starred in Milos Forman's drama "Goya's Ghosts," and coming up is Woody Allen's "Vicky Cristina Barcelona," due next year.

And the buzz surrounding Bardem for his chillingly focused portrayal of enigmatic hit man Anton Chigurh in "No Country" means he'll be busy working the awards circuit for months to come. Happily, living overseas helps the 38-year-old actor keep it in perspective.

"The fact that I'm from Spain gives me a perspective that is more sane," says Bardem, a member of an acting dynasty that's the Spanish equivalent of the Barrymores. "I can [put] myself in a place that is more distant from all the things that may go around this movie or any other movie. It's like a hurricane of echoes that you don't want to listen to."

Bardem notes of course that the attention on him helps the films gain an audience. And, of course, no actor shies from the spotlight.

"I have my ego, just like anyone else," says Bardem with good humor. "And I'm an actor, so I have extra of that. But I can't lose the logic of knowing that [an award] can't be the goal. I couldn't get out of bed if I had to constantly think about what is the best thing to do in order to be liked by others. You just do your thing with your limitations and sometimes you hit the note, and sometimes you are totally wrong."

"When you feel people have a response to what you've done, you feel happy. But I truly believe that performing is a need. I know a lot of actors and actresses; my mother is an actress. ... It's a need, but it doesn't mean you need to be approved for what you do. Sometimes that might happen and sometimes it might not happen. It's not important. What's important is to go and act."

For Bardem, playing the almost fanatically devout lover Florentino in "Cholera" was especially important.

"It was a book I read when I was 14, which is a little young to understand what's in that," says Bardem. "It made a deep impression on me. After that, I read it two times more! When I realized a movie was being made, I really wanted to read [the screenplay]. Of course, no script can match a masterpiece of a book, that's impossible. But it grabbed the essence of the book."

"And just as Anton Chigurh in 'No



Country' is a symbolic idea of violence, Florentino is a symbolic idea of insane love. He's unreal.

"Marquez chose Florentino to make us realize the huge, wide-open landscape of what love means and represents the suffering and joy of it in one person's soul. And that was a challenging thing to do."

Just as challenging as being in that Woody Allen movie?

"Working with Woody is amazing," says Bardem, who plays a painter, his first passion until he realized he wouldn't be as accomplished on the canvas as on the screen.

"It's really, really a unique experience because it goes fast, man. It goes really fast. You have to be really prepared and not overthink it too much, and at the same time you have jewels in your mouth because of the dialogue," he wrote. ♦



Javier Bardem stars as a life-long romantic in "Love in the Time of Cholera" (top l.) and as a relentless assassin in "No Country for Old Men." Left, at the AFI Fest in L.A. last month. Photo by Apega/AbacaUSA.com