

## Official Competition

An aged pharma multimillionaire Humberto Suárez (José Luis Gomez), celebrating his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, is musing on his legacy but rejects the idea of commissioning some kind of routine monument or totem. Instead, he wishes to leave a different kind of mark by financing a major motion picture deemed a work of art. To this end, he looks to hire the best known Spanish film director in the business, the eccentric Lola Cuevas (Penelope Lopez).

The screenplay for this film is to be adapted from an award-winning novel about a man who is unable to forgive his brother for killing their parents in a drunk-driving accident. The two brothers are to be played by the renowned stage actor and drama teacher Iván Torres (Oscar Martinez) and the popular celebrity movie star Félix Rivero (Antonio Banderas), whose varied sensibilities and methods cause them to immediately clash during Cuevas' lengthy rehearsals.

The film is essentially made up of that very eccentric rehearsal period (in fact, we never see any shooting of the final film itself). Cuevas has her own idiosyncratic ways of working, starting with a massive, messy scrapbook which is a bursting collage of notes and images. Her aim is to elicit actor's reactions and assess their skills, starting right off the bat with a lengthy (an arbitrary) critique of Torres's delivery of the phrase "Good Morning" on the first reading of the script.

She also aims to "increase tension" between the duo by having them rehearse under a giant boulder hanging by a rope, then has the two actors throw insults at each other to test their level of ego.

A singular test for Ivan and Felix comes in a weird and sardonic scene that eventually turns excruciating: after collecting many of the awards each actor has won in their careers, she places their hardware on a theater stage while both men sit in an empty audience totally immobilized in plastic wrap (only their noses and eyes showing) while one of Lola's assistants proceeds to smash the cherished awards to bits. Horrified, the encased actors scream and struggle as their pride is being demolished in front of their eyes.

The actors do try to get back at Lola and each other by using their acting chops to deceive her and themselves. For example, Ivan dolefully announces at one point that he is dying from a lethal disease—effectively killing the project—only to quickly admit he was only "kidding."

"Official Competition" was directed by Argentine filmmakers [Gastón Duprat](#) and [Mariano Cohn](#) from a screenplay by Duprat, Cohn, and Andrés Duprat. The duo of Duprat and Cohn have made ten films together, most of them never seen in the US. This may be—with its famous Spanish leads and its enthralling plot—their chance for a breakthrough to the North American independent movie market. Too quirky to be a blockbuster, it mingles both dead-pan comedy with off-beat intellect to intrigue the thoughtful filmgoer. And the co-directors get wry and rich performances out of their three leads.

Lopez continues to amaze with her range, especially coming off her most recent performance as a bright Spanish activist in “Parallel Mothers,” released just a few months ago. With her tough charm and a mane of fuzzy hair, she keeps you guessing about her next move, keeping you on edge just as much as she does her two actors.

Worthy of mention, too, is the setting of “Official Competition:” shot in the Teatro Auditorio of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, a super-modern building in the complex of the historic Escorial castle outside of Madrid, it offers a futuristic space for its protagonists to glide around in.

*(The film, now in theaters, runs 115 minutes and is rated “R.”)*

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