

TF PLAYER



TOTAL FILM

REVOLUTIONARY

He became a star playing Che. Now Gael García Bernal is trashing the Hollywood rules to turn director for scathing class drama **Déficit**...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

Hey man, sorry I'm late," says Gael García Bernal as he greets *Total Film* in a private members' club just off Portobello Road. We've been waiting to grill Mexico's arthouse prince about his directorial debut *Déficit* and our thumbs are well and truly twiddled by the time he skitters across the room with his hand outstretched.

But we swiftly forgive Bernal his fashionable lateness. In London for a whistle-stop 36 hours before jetting back home, it turns out he's just dashed across town from meeting his mentor Alfonso Cuarón. Bernal was showing him *The Letter*, a short film that acts as a segment of we-are-the-world-anthology 8.

"I had to get his approval, like the guru of the Himalayas," Bernal says, his wide, toothy grin cracking across a face covered by weeks of hirsute growth. "Alfonso is my guru. He's the one I go all the way to the mountain for, to present my work." So, was the *Children Of Men* man full of sage advice for his young disciple after seeing his efforts on *The Letter*? "I learned from it, more than being advised what to change," says Bernal, who counts himself as a green-behind-the-ears apprentice

"on a huge learning curve" when it comes to wielding a megaphone.

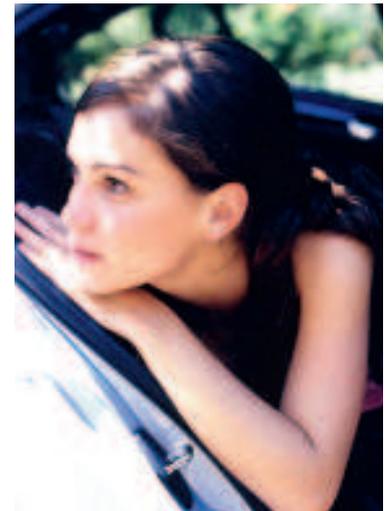
Take *Déficit*, the feature that Bernal shot last year in Mexico, about spoiled, quasi-obnoxious rich kids behaving badly in a country villa. It may be marching straight to DVD in the UK but Bernal, who's been Latin-American cinema's heartthrob figurehead since first blazing onto screens in *Amores Perros*, never envisioned *Déficit* having a spectacular theatrical life. Spun off from a state-of-the-nation series that his production company Canana was developing for Mexican television, it was shot on video with a micro-budget "as a little exercise".

"I always wanted to try directing," explains the multilingual actor in his practiced English. "But I wanted to try it in an incredibly free way and with a very abstract approach. I just wanted to throw myself into the adventure of saying, 'Fuck it, I'll just do a little film.' And it's not about the career move. It has nothing to do with that."

As soothing jazz pumps quietly out of a stereo in the corner, Bernal looks and sounds almost sheepish about his debut. Strange, given its rough edges are soothed over by a sharp eye for detail and a crisp vibrancy that's sustained throughout the brief running time. Through the character of >>



First timer: (left) Bernal as rich kid Cristobal in his directing debut *Déficit*; (below) Camila Sodi as sister Elisa.



Cristobal (Bernal), his sister Elisa (Camila Sodi) and a weekend house party they throw for their drug-addled friends, *Déficit* digs deep into the contemptuous chasm that exists between Mexico's smug elite and the underlings who serve them.

Bearing Bernal's on-set ethos of freewheeling experimentation, it plays like a Larry Clark film with tequila shots and chaste pecks instead of pools of vomit and ankles-round-the-ears carnality. "It was a deliberate decision to make it a human drama rather than a full-on account of bad things happening," says Bernal. "There were many things left as accidents. Sometimes it worked wonderfully and sometimes it didn't make sense at all. And not only that, it felt pretentious. I felt there was a bit of incongruence

committed to weaving socially minded stories. "It's a huge part of who I am," says Bernal. "It feels like my home. It's a creative circle where everyone's under 30 – well, soon it's not going to be because I'm 30 this year!"

And Bernal has every intention of following *Déficit* with another feature. "I feel a strong sense of revenge!" grins the diminutive star. "I don't know who said it but the only thing that works out in the first film is that you want to do your second one. I feel I learned a lot and I want to test it again."

Déficit may lack the subtle shades of *Y Tu Mamá También* or the potency of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, but Bernal is studying at the feet of his mentors. He not only canvassed Cuarón while jigsawing together *Déficit* in the editing suite, but also Walter Salles and



Changing faces: (from top) *The Science Of Sleep*; *The Motorcycle Diaries*; Mexican soap *El Abuelo Y Yo*; *Amores Perros*.

of it." And with good reason: he has trodden a wary but audacious path, appearing in roles as rangy as the blonde transvestite in *Bad Education* and the dream-weaver TV host in *The Science Of Sleep*. This year, you'll see him in Carlos Cuarón's *Rudo Y Cursi*, starring with Luna as rival professional footballers who happen to be brothers, plus Lukas Moodysson's whacked-out *Mammoth* and Fernando Meirelles' sinister *Blindness*, about an epidemic of sightlessness that sweeps a city.

Even the untrained eye can spot that the charisma-blessed actor is avoiding the chunky-salaried Hollywood fodder that lured his one-time co-star Salma Hayek (they starred in a Mexican soap when he was 10) across the border. Despite repeated offers, including the roving assassin Edgar Ramirez portrayed in *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the closest he's come is *Babel* – and even then he stayed south of the Rio Grande and accepted the role of Adriana Barraza's nephew largely as a favour to Iñárritu.

"Maybe it's not right to say 'avoid,'" he demurs. "It's just that the things I've been offered have had to compete with the other things that I've been doing. But it's a strong comfort zone, in that this position has allowed me to keep experimenting without having anything to lose. I feel that if things go in that direction, you start to think that you have things to lose. And you should never think like that. There's *nothing* to lose. I'm already doing what I like doing so I might as well do exactly what I like all the time..."

***Déficit* is released on DVD on 21 July and will be reviewed in the next issue.**

"I LEARNED A LOT ON DÉFICIT AND I WANT TO TEST IT AGAIN"

between what we tried to do, the making of it and the outcome. We knew what we wanted to tell, we didn't know how.

"I prefer to see it like an experiment. And there's nothing wrong with a film being an experiment," he continues. "I think our struggle to make it is there on the screen. And that we had a good time making it, too."

Déficit is the latest film to emerge from Canana, the production company that he and childhood friend Diego Luna set up three years ago. "Upstart shingle" was how *Variety* greeted the firm's birth, wielding the dilettante whip that often snaps down on young actors who dare to produce. Bernal sees it as a conduit for channelling some of his and Luna's good fortune back home – a melting pot for budding Mexican film talent,

Alejandro González Iñárritu. "They were great at getting out the machetes and chopping away," he chuckles. "They just made everything work out."

Bernal's recent gig will boost his profile, joining Gus Van Sant, Jane Campion, Wim Wenders, Mira Nair and Gaspar Noé on 8 – a collection of shorts that are themed around the UN's millennial development project. Bernal's segment, entitled *The Letter*, documents the goal to achieve primary general education and was filmed in Iceland with local actors. "I loved working in another language," says Bernal. "It opened a new pathway. Maybe I'll try it in another language..."

But don't count on it being in Hollywood. For one thing, Bernal files directing alongside football as one of his hobbies. "I don't want to think of it as a career," he says. "I'm an actor – that's my profession and I'm proud

NEXT UP... BLINDNESS

"I'm the King of Ward 3! It's an incredible book. I read it 10 years ago and I was really pleased when I got the phone call from Fernando Meirelles and he invited me to be in the film. It's a semi-Biblical story, so I become the side of humanity that we tend to run away from. Between Cain and Abel, I'm Cain. He's not a bad guy, he just found another way of surviving."

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