



***Spanglish*—Narcissistic Personalities and Their Complicit Partners**

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Rated PG-13 for some sexual content and brief language. Actually I don't remember any bad language, but maybe that's not surprising. I didn't notice many instances of bad language in "Midnight Run," either, until there were protests in the news about the movie's incessant profanity and I viewed the movie a second time. Such comes of a misspent youth in the South Side of Chicago.

"Spanglish" successfully interweaves several stories. It begins with that of Christina (Shelbie Bruce) and her mother, Flor (Paz Vega), a beautiful Mexican national who leaves Mexico for a better life in the United States for herself and her daughter after her husband left them. After spending six years in the barrio of Los Angeles, Flor takes a housekeeping job for the Claskys, a well-to-do family. It is her first venture into the Anglo world. John Clasky (Adam Sandler) is a renowned chef who owns his own restaurant; his wife, Deborah (Tea Leoni), is a thoroughgoing neurotic, who helped run a commercial design company for a while, but who at the time of the movie is a full-time mom. Rounding out the household are Deborah's usually inebriated mother, Evelyn (Cloris Leachman); a middle-school-aged daughter, Bernice (Sarah Steele); and a son, George, whose part in the movie is so small that the actor's name (Ian Hyland) is usually not listed in movie reviews.

Soon after Flor starts working for the Claskys, the movie shifts its focus onto Deborah, who is a basically kind woman with politically and socially correct views on most issues, but whose chaotic inner life often interferes with her efforts to adhere to those precepts. Later, John's story briefly takes center stage, until the focus shifts back to Flor and Christina. Obviously, such a movie could have easily become a mess, were it not for the considerable talents of writer/director James L. Brooks and his collaborators.

The movie opens with a roomful of Princeton University administrators who are considering the merits of letters from students applying for admission to the university, including one from Christina, which she begins reading in voiceover. Christina tells the story of her origins in Mexico and of her emigration to the United States with her mother. The voiceover quickly segues to scenes depicting the events.

If the movie does nothing special to capture your interest initially, it offers much to hold it afterward, through marvelous performances, a generous sprinkling of humor throughout, and multiple storylines that keep you guessing. There is also a guilty pleasure often found in American movies, involving the depiction of the well-to-do as having lives that are more screwed up than those of other people because of either petty jealousies, bickering spouses, or the odd relative here and there. In this movie, Deborah provides so much dysfunction that the odd relative—the drunken Evelyn—comes off as almost a normalizing element.

In the bonus material accompanying the DVD version of the movie, Brooks explains Deborah's behavior as being due to a mid-life crisis and sees Flor as bringing some semblance of balance to the wacky Anglo family. He also sees the movie as basically a romantic comedy, with the romantic element coming from the growing mutual attraction between John and Flor. While all of this is plausible, it really only scratches the surface of the movie, which is fundamentally a window into the lives of narcissistic personalities and their complicit relatives.

I hate using psychological labels, because they are often misleading when they are not downright wrongheaded, as with the label “narcissism.” Narcissus was a youth in Greek mythology who through a curse became so enamored of his own reflection that he lost all interest in everything else and ultimately died as a result. The connection with narcissistic people is that they often appear prideful and self-absorbed. While it is true that narcissistic people do seem this way, deep down they suffer from extremely low self-esteem. Narcissistic people are very fearful of not being well thought of by others, and they actually attempt to control others' behavior and viewpoints as a protective measure. They unconsciously see themselves as being dangerously inadequate, and as vulnerable to blame and rejection. They keep these hurtful perceptions from reaching the surface through a conscious sense of grandiosity and through a preoccupation with their own physical and social image. This immersion in their own affairs has the effect of excluding others, leading to an inability to empathize with another's experiences and to an insistence that their own opinions and values are “right.”

Narcissistically complicit people are simply people who have adapted to living with one or more narcissistic parents. In interpersonal situations, children of narcissists tend to feel very responsible for other people, and they are typically insecure because they have not been valued for themselves, but rather only to the extent that they have met their parents' needs. Narcissistically complicit people tend to have low self-esteem, work hard to please others, defer to others' opinions, focus on others' worldviews while remaining largely unaware of their own, are often depressed or anxious, find it hard to know how they think and feel about a subject, doubt the validity of their own views and opinions (especially when these conflict with others' views), and take the blame for interpersonal problems. When in the presence of a narcissistic person, a complicit person tends to vanish as a personality, so that there is psychologically only one person present.

If you see the movie and use this thumbnail sketch as a guide, you will find, first of all, that there are possibly narcissistic and complicit people all over the place. Deborah and John are definitely narcissistic and complicit, respectively. Flor is also definitely narcissistic, although a bit more subtly so, because she is depicted as the good narcissist who serves as a contrast to Deborah. But she is just as insensitive to Christina's feelings as Deborah is to the feelings of everyone in her family. Another possible narcissist is John's second-in-command at the restaurant, with another possibly complicit person (besides Christina and Deborah's children) being a suck-up female cook at the restaurant.

Flor reveals her narcissism during her first meeting with Deborah, Evelyn, and the children, when she insists that Deborah pronounce her name correctly in the Spanish manner. This insistence is in effect a shot across Deborah's bow, warning her of the presence of another narcissist in her midst. Much of the movie is an example of the type of turmoil that could ensue when there are two narcissists in a household. There can only be one, which is why others in the household must either become complicit or leave, as Flor eventually does.

Actually the one-narcissist-per-household rule is not absolute. Although he doesn't appear in the movie, Flor's husband was evidently very macho, which is to say that he was a narcissistic personality. Pairings between narcissistic men and women are evidently not uncommon in Mexico, and they can work because of a division of responsibility. A macho man will defer to his narcissistic wife regarding several issues, while she will defer to him in other clearly defined areas.

Flor expects a man to be macho, so she has no respect for John initially, since he seems to her to be as emotional as a Mexican woman. Only gradually does she come to respect him as a person and glimpse the possible advantages of having a romantic relationship with a narcissistically complicit man.

At one point in the movie, Deborah jeopardizes her marriage by beginning an affair with a real estate agent. She then jeopardizes it again by pulling no punches in informing John of her transgressions, once the affair has ended. Would a real person do such a thing? A narcissist would.

At the time Deborah begins the affair, John is becoming attracted to Flor. It is all very innocent, but Deborah's narcissistic lack of self-esteem would sensitize her to the situation and lead her to feel that her marriage was seriously threatened. So it is understandable that she try to reassure herself that she remains sexually attractive. She may also have been seeking a fallback relationship, should her marriage disintegrate.

A lack of self-esteem is what leads narcissists to be control freaks. It's not that they feel deep down that they know the best way of doing everything, and therefore have a right to dictate to others. It's more a matter of testing the current strength of their relationships with those who are important to them. Since they don't feel worthy of love, they can never be sure of its persistence without a series of demonstrations. Narcissists strive to dominate others to test their ongoing submission to them. To a narcissist, submission equals love. Deborah's confession represents a supreme test of this type. And, although deeply hurt, John provides her with the reassurance she needs.

The movie ends on a mixed note. John will clearly remain complicit no matter what Deborah does. Christina, however, has a bit more spunk. Flor forbid Christina from accepting a \$20,000 scholarship Deborah arranged to a good Anglo middle school, in effect insisting that Christina remain just like her. Yet the movie begins and ends with Christina's application to Princeton, which suggests that somehow she got a good secondary education. True, Christina does end the letter by saying that she would be content to be just like her mother, but that's just guilt talking. She'll do just fine, because she's evidently got her survivor guilt well under control.

Actually both girls will probably do fine, since Bernice seems pretty spunky too. According to another rule of thumb, narcissism gets transmitted through learning along sexual lines. That is to say, children having the same sex as the narcissistic parent will tend to make a transition to narcissistic adults, while those of the opposite sex will tend to remain complaint. So Christina and Bernice will possibly become narcissistic, but will probably be more sensitive to others' feelings than Deborah and Flor were, just as Deborah and Flor were probably more sensitive than their narcissistic mothers. The worrisome character is George, the small-part son, who will probably grow up to be just as complicit as John.