

Amusing, but no triumph—Almodóvar's *Volver*

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Volver, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar

Pedro Almodóvar is the most prominent Spanish filmmaker currently working. With the release of *Volver*, which won best screenplay at Cannes last year, along with best actress award for the entire female cast led by Penélope Cruz, Almodóvar's films continue to garner a measure of praise that is remarkable for its excess.

It might appear that with *Volver* Almodóvar is taking himself a little less seriously than his admirers in the industry, which would come as something of a relief. He remains nevertheless inflated in his own estimation, referring to his film as a meeting of Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and Frank Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944). Such self-generated comparisons are a little unseemly; they also give the film more credit than it deserves.

Almodóvar's work deals largely with unusual problems of unusual characters in unusual situations. Though his choices may lend drama of a sort to his work, they mask an unwillingness or inability to probe the more difficult, if commonplace problems of life. Even *Volver*, which is one of his lighter works, touches on a range of painful personal themes—the loss of a loved one, marital infidelity, financial difficulty, etc., but from a far too comfortable angle and with a tidy resolution that tends to trivialize the events.

The director professes that his latest film is more than a little autobiographical in that it involves something of a review of his own childhood and so is supposedly intensely personal, but that, unfortunately, is something one learns from his interviews rather than the film itself. One can understand why he might want to take a lighter approach to such material, but on the whole, the treatment by Almodóvar of his characters seems lacking in real empathy—they are largely two-dimensional creations whose fate we never truly come to care about.

Volver—the title literally means “to return”—is a minor film with some unseemly pretensions. Replete with symbolic imagery of things revolving—car and bicycle wheels, wind turbines, etc.—creative camera angles and compositions, the

devices he employs strike one as self-conscious efforts to impress his audience with his cinematic virtuosity. Whatever his technical skill—and some of this can be credited to cinematographer and art director José Luis Alcaíne—Almodóvar seems to lack a genuine feel for his characters or the world around him in general, or at least to be capable of expressing it directly and convincingly.

Penelope Cruz has the leading role of Raimunda, a housewife who also works as a cleaning woman and is married to Paco, played by Antonio de la Torre, a brute of a man for whom we have little sympathy and who is the only significant male role in the film. Early on, he is murdered, and since none of the other female characters have any male attachment, the director is left with them all to himself.

Cruz seems quite comfortable in the role of a hard-working, no-nonsense housewife, a seemingly inappropriate casting for an actress who has been marketed as a glamorous sex icon, and indeed her considerable assets are still well exploited here; but her genuine simplicity and humility are welcome in this portrayal. Her weakness for excessive sentimentality, however, combines with that of the director's and undermines an otherwise engaging performance.

Raimunda has a sister named Sole, played sweetly by Lola Dueñas, who runs an illegal hairdressing business from her home. The two sisters had contrasting relationships with their mother Abuela Irene, who was supposedly burned in a fire with their father but who turns up as, what we are led to believe, a ghost. We learn of the longstanding rift between Raimunda and her mother, portrayed playfully by Carmen Maura, arising from the sexual abuse inflicted on her by her father, for which Raimunda holds her mother responsible and which produced Raimunda's daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo).

Family history repeats itself, but this time comic revenge interrupts tragedy when Paula kills her father before she can be molested. The antics begin when Raimunda attempts to cover up the crime by getting rid of the body, and a good deal of black humor ensues. It could all be fairly amusing if

it weren't overlaid with the director's unconvincing determination to attach some deeper significance to the story.

The one figure who evokes some real pathos is the next-door neighbor Agustina, a role to which actress Blanca Portillo brings an understated simplicity. Agustina is the martyr of the story, her father having been killed in the same fire as the sisters' parents and herself stricken with cancer. It is a Joan of Arc sort of role that the director doesn't resist crassly exploiting for both comic and tragic dividends in a sequence where she appears on a confessional television show and is thoroughly humiliated.

The one point at which the outside world intrudes is when a film company enters the neighborhood in the impoverished town of La Mancha, where *Volver* is set and where Almodóvar grew up. Raimunda uses the opportunity to turn a profit at the local restaurant, which had been closed by the owner who has left town, entrusting her with access so she can show the property to prospective buyers. Having catered for the film crew for several days, the wrap party provides the occasion for Raimunda to showcase her long-idled singing talents, ostensibly for her daughter's benefit. It is a sad and lovely song she sings, but altogether overwrought and far too precious to be really moving.

The final resting place for her husband is on the banks of a river, the scene of childhood memories and where, as a couple, Raimunda and her husband spent some of their best times. But these tender reflections are merely conveyed in narrative, not shown; and in all, their significance is belittled in the comic burial she carries out with the help of a local prostitute. There could be real drama here—or real comedy—but the director's lack of emotional commitment dooms the scene to fall flat.

Overall, the tone of the movie falls somewhere between slapstick and bad television melodrama, albeit with some impressive cinematic flourish. Critics have lauded the film for its richness of color and photographic artistry, which, while perhaps deserved, are qualities that stand out, tasting too much of themselves rather than being integral to the flavor.

Commenting on the making of *Volver* in his hometown, Almodóvar confesses that "Coming back to La Mancha is always to come back to the maternal breast.... I don't know if the film is good (I'm not the one to say), but I'm sure that it did me a lot of good to make it." He is entitled to his efforts at reconciliation with his childhood, but we are entitled to something more. And it must be asked, if this project involved such intimate and painful feelings for him, why is there so little evidence of real difficulty? For him, "The most difficult thing about *Volver* has been writing its synopsis.... This doesn't mean that *Volver* is better than my

previous film, just that this time I suffered less. In fact, I didn't suffer at all."

The director says that in this film he wanted to deal with how death is treated in the backward culture of rural Spain in which he grew up so that he might come to better terms with his own mortality. Scenes of spirited women tending the graves of loved ones, whispering duennas at a wake—these are colorful reminiscences and highlight a culture of quasi-medieval superstition that the director says he now eschews, but which he is loathe to leave behind. It would seem that the only consolation he can find is in making death humorous and superstition charming.

Little in *Volver* is as emotionally convincing as the director has been led to believe by the overwhelmingly favorable attention his film has received. In fact, one of the most affecting sequences is of Raimunda cleaning floors in a cavernous office tower lobby that seems somehow divorced from the rest of the film in its depiction of modern alienation. But Almodóvar is apparently not concerned with broader social and historical problems, and that is his prerogative—but if he means to deal with his inner world and that of his characters, we have the right to expect some emotional depth if not insight.

"Guilelessly wonderful," "gripping melodrama," "effortlessly gorgeous"—these are some of the phrases critics have used to describe *Volver*. Andrew Sarris calls his treatment of women "intelligent, perceptive and creative." Comparisons to Hitchcock, Sirk, Buñuel, Truffaut and more are all there. Given the slightness of this film one must conclude that there is something more at work here than considered, objective opinion, including wishful thinking perhaps.

The filmmaker may not be responsible for the media hype surrounding his work, but neither has Almodóvar any fear of the limelight or an inclination to modesty. Whether this director warrants the praise that continues to come his way is a matter that history will decide. Soberly assessed, however, *Volver* should not be considered more than amusing diversion.



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