

The Darkest of Troubles in the Brightest of Colors

By A.O. SCOTT

The action in [“Volver”](#) moves back and forth between a workaday neighborhood in Madrid and a windswept village in the Spanish countryside. Really, though, the movie takes place in a familiar, enchanted land — Almodóvaria, you might call it, or maybe Pedrostan— where every room and street corner is saturated with bright color and vivid feeling and where discordant notes of violence, jealousy and fear ultimately resolve in the deeper harmonies of art.

[Pedro Almodóvar](#), the benevolent deity of this world, has revealed it — or, rather, created it — piece by piece from one film to the next. His two previous movies, [“Talk to Her”](#) (2002) and [“Bad Education”](#) (2004), explored previously uncharted regions of masculine melodrama, while “Volver,” whose title can be translated as “to return,” revisits the woman-centered territory of [“All About My Mother”](#) (1999) and [“Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown”](#) (1988). Drawing on influences ranging from Latin American telenovelas to classic Hollywood weepies and on an iconography of female endurance that includes [Anna Magnani](#) and [Joan Crawford](#), Mr. Almodóvar has made yet another picture that moves beyond camp into a realm of wise, luxuriant humanism.

“Volver,” full of surprises and reversals, unfolds with breathtaking ease and self-confidence. It is in some ways a smaller, simpler film than either “Talk to Her” or “Bad Education,” choosing to tell its story without flashbacks or intricate parallel plots, but it is no less the work of a master. And it’s a testament to the filmmaker’s generosity of spirit that he effectively hands the movie over to its ensemble of lively and resourceful actresses, and in particular to its star, [Penélope Cruz](#).

Ms. Cruz plays Raimunda, a hard-working woman pulled in every direction by terrible events and by the needs of the women around her.

At one point in the film she answers a knock on the door from her neighbor, Emilio (Carlos Blanco), one of the tiny, mostly superfluous handful of men who appear on screen. Emilio, who clearly has a crush on Raimunda, notices a streak of blood on her neck and asks if she's all right. "Women's troubles," she says with a quick smile, which is both a startlingly risqué joke and the literal truth.

Such troubles! The blood belongs to her husband, Paco (Antonio de la Torre), who has recently expired in a bright crimson pool on the kitchen floor after taking a carving knife to the belly. His killing is not exactly to be shrugged off — and he does eventually receive a proper burial of sorts — but he is not exactly mourned either. Men, for Raimunda and her circle, tend to be malevolent, irrelevant or simply absent: straying husbands, predators, dead bodies. They cause a fair amount of trouble, but the point of "Volver" is that it's not about them.

It is about what American feminists of an earlier era called sisterhood, and also about the complicated bonds of kinship and friendship that Mr. Almodóvar observed as a child growing up among women in traditional, patriarchal, gender-separated (and fascist) Spain. Raimunda's troubles may be extreme, but she bustles through them with passionate determination, making room for every emotion except self-pity. There are too many other people who need her sympathy, above all her teenage daughter, Paula (Yohana Cobo), who was subject to Paco's lecherous, unwelcome attention. Raimunda must also tend to Sole (the wonderful Lola Dueñas), her sister, whose face registers loneliness and disappointment even as she tries to radiate busyness and good cheer; to their elderly Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave); and to Agustina (Blanca Portillo), a neighbor whose sorrows could easily fill another movie. There is also a restaurant to run (it's Emilio's, but Raimunda takes over in his absence) and, on the other side of the screen, an audience to tease, charm, provoke and wrap around one of her long, expressive fingers.

With this role Ms. Cruz inscribes her name near the top of any credible list of present-day flesh-and-blood screen goddesses, in no small part because she manages to be earthy, unpretentious and a little vulgar

without shedding an ounce of her natural glamour. What's more, Mr. Almodóvar has had the sly inspiration to cast Carmen Maura, one of the stars of his early, madcap period, as Raimunda's mother, who seems to have returned from the dead to add a touch of the gothic (and the surreal) to the proceedings. Ms. Maura's warm good humor is a crucial element in the film's emotional design. It is a chronicle, mostly, of tragedy and horror, rendered in bright, happy colors.

To relate the details of the narrative — death, cancer, betrayal, parental abandonment, more death — would create an impression of dreariness and woe. But nothing could be further from the spirit of “Volver,” which is buoyant without being flip, and consoling without ever becoming maudlin. Mr. Almodóvar acknowledges misfortune — and takes it seriously — from a perspective that is essentially comic. Very few filmmakers have managed to smile so convincingly in the face of misery and fatality: [Jean Renoir](#) and [Billy Wilder](#) come immediately to mind, and Mr. Almodóvar, if he is not yet their equal, surely belongs in their company. “Volver” is often dazzling in its artifice — José Luis Alcaíne's ripe cinematography, Alberto Iglesias's suave, heart-tugging score — but it is never false. It draws you in, invites you to linger and makes you eager to return. It offers something better than realism. The real world, after all, is where we all have to live; for some of us, though, Mr. Almodóvar's world is home.