

Forget the *man* of La Mancha. "Volver" puts the town's women front and center.

By Carina Chocano, Times Staff Writer

Like most homecomings (or at least most good ones), Pedro Almodóvar's "Volver" is warm, emotional and forever on the brink of tears — peppered with bouts of pique, old resentments that flare up and moments of intense and lyrical longing. But what matters most are the kisses — madcap machine-gun smacks that the characters plant on each others' cheeks as though underlining their affection in triplicate. The title means "coming back," and it marks a return, as the Spanish director has said, to the La Mancha of his youth, to his comedic roots, to the world of women, to mothers and to the actress Carmen Maura, one of the original "Chicas Almodóvar" with whom he had a painful falling out 16 years ago.

"Volver" represents a radical shift from the dark catharsis of "Bad Education," a story of corrosive lust and cruelty. The new movie is reminiscent of his work from two decades ago, especially "What Have I Done to Deserve This?," in which Maura played a frustrated working-class housewife and part-time cleaning woman who eventually kills her husband with a leg of ham. (As in the episode of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" that inspired it, she later cooks the ham and offers it to the detectives.) That film was in many ways a precursor to "Volver," though the new film, saturated with color and melancholy, is drained of the acid satire and gallows humor that flowed through the first, more melodrama than punch in the gut.

"Volver" is just as funny as "What Have I Done," but it's also more sanguine and complex. Its humor is brighter and loopier, more a function of the characters' indomitable spirit than of their terminal despair. The characters' lives are similar — small-town women living in the depressing low-rent hives on the edges of Madrid, where housewives befriend prostitutes and husbands are good for very little. No glum victims, the women of "Volver" are survivors in the mold of characters once played by Anna Magnani and Sophia Loren (whom Penélope Cruz is styled to resemble more than a little).

Also very present is the spirit of Joan Crawford in "Mildred Pierce," which lends the story its central predicament. Maura plays Irene, who was killed along with her husband in a fire, and returns as a ghost to rectify some things she was unable to take care of in life. Specifically, she's come back for her daughters, the fierce, headstrong Raimunda (Cruz) and her sister, melancholy Sole (Lola Dueñas). The sisters now live and work in Madrid — Raimunda as an airport cleaner, Sole as a hairdresser who runs an "illegal" salon from her apartment — but when we first see Raimunda and Sole, accompanied by Raimunda's daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo), they are tending to their parents' graves in their hometown. The cemetery is a hive of activity, as the town's widows busily polish headstones and change flowers. One neighbor, Agustina (Blanca Portillo), tends to her own grave, which, as Raimunda explains to Paula, is customary in the town.

Agustina has been looking after her neighbor, Raimunda and Sole's aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave), who despite having lapsed into the late stages of dementia seems to be looking after herself suspiciously well. Her house is tended to and well-stocked, and she sends the sisters off with containers of homemade food. Agustina's explanation: The ghost of Irene has returned to care for the elderly Paula — she knows this to be true because several villagers have spotted her. Raimunda, whose difficult life and marriage to the perennially drunk and unemployed Paco (Antonio de la Torre) leave her little time for whimsy, finds the idea as ludicrous as the lonely Sole finds it terrifying. When Irene smuggles herself back to Madrid in the trunk of Sole's car, she finds she has to insinuate herself carefully into her daughters' lives.

Irene's reappearance turns out to be well-timed, as Raimunda and her daughter Paula soon find themselves in a serious predicament. For the director, the incident presents less of an opportunity for tension and suspense than for a bittersweet expression of strength and solidarity. The spirit of La Mancha is present in more than the return of Irene — it's infused in the depressing big-city neighborhood that small-town laborers now share with undocumented foreign workers. Raimunda turns to her friend Regina (María Isabel Díaz), a Dominican prostitute, when she needs help — making sure to pay her hourly rate. In the absence of men — who, even when they appear, don't last long — the women form their own cooperative society. Despite their many "woman troubles" (a perfect joke Raimunda makes at a tense moment) — or possibly because of them — the women's cheerful solidarity is at once surprising and surprisingly natural.

Almodóvar has cast himself as the chronicler of the Spanish soul, and in "Volver" he deftly weaves the old Spain with the new. The town, now a klatch of superstitious biddies, is in many ways itself a friendly ghost of the past. As arid and wind-swept as ever, the countryside of La Mancha is dotted with wind turbines instead of Quixotic windmills, though this obvious sign of modernity has done nothing to curb the high incidence of fires and madness in the region Cervantes made famous.

The director has said that, for him, returning to La Mancha is like returning to the maternal bosom. And much is made of Raimunda's throughout the film. ("Between my *mojitos* and your cleavage," Regina tells Raimunda after they take over an absent neighbor's shuttered cafe and set up shop catering meals for a film crew.) But the smattering of desultory advances from a couple of would-be suitors seems to evaporate on contact with the force field that seems to surround Raimunda. Subtly padded and pushed-up, her eyes lined and ears hooped like Carmen, Raimunda is a striking symbol of the Spanish feminine. And Cruz, who has remarked that in Hollywood she's rarely allowed to be anything more than pretty, instills her with an awesome resoluteness and strength of character.

It's no wonder, then, that the obstacles in her life — doozies all — seem to recede as she advances. There's a crime, but no investigation. Some romantic interest, but no follow-up. It's as if all that is sordid about the characters' lives pales in comparison to their love, devotion and care for one another. As a result, as its title implies, "Volver" feels less of a journey than a longed-for respite. Once there, you want to stay a little longer.