

Spanish import is a fun, twisted comedy

By JAMES DEAN
Staff Writer

"Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," as its title suggests, is very funny. It is the most successful in a string of comedies from the new king of Spanish cinema, Pedro Almodovar. Not only has it achieved the feat of being the most popular Spanish film ever in Spain, but it has also become the second most popular foreign-language film ever at the American box office after "La Cage aux Folles." And, as if that wasn't accolade enough, it has just been nominated for Best Foreign film at this month's Academy Awards, which it may very well win.

Almodovar's two previous films, "Matador" and "Law of Desire" were, to say the least, bolder than "Women on the Verge." The humor was simply less refined, and based more prominently on the carefree sex habits of a strange section of the Spanish population. The reason that both films were delights to watch in spite of their outrageousness lay in Almodovar's ability to write and direct immensely likable characters, even though they were some of the craziest characters you could hope for (if that's what you hope for). You laugh at them, but after a while you find yourself strangely affected by them. It is an unexpected pleasure.

With "Women on the Verge," Almodovar has kept the charac-

ters but given them less grotesque and perverse characteristics. Gone is the "Matador" school-teacher who gets his kicks watching people get decapitated by giant industrial circular saws. Gone, too, is the "Law of Desire" transsexual woman whose old choir-master recognizes her face from somewhere, but cannot place it until she reminds him of the affair they had before she, as a he, ran off with her father. Compared to them, the cast of "Women on the Verge" has little to hide.

The beauty of the film is that despite their relative normality by Almodovarian standards, they are still verging on the twisted. The life and soul of the film (until Lucia gets into the swing of things — more of that later) is Pepa Marcos, a television actress and movie voice dubber. Pepa has been spurned by her smooth lover, Ivan (also a movie voice dubber), and, to be frank, it has pushed her to her limits. She is not a happy woman, and it takes a dose of sleeping pills to get over this setback. When she becomes bored with that idea, she decides to track him down at all costs.

From this point the complications start, all of which involve traumatic women. It turns out that Ivan has a vengeful old lover, Lucia, who tricked her way out of an asylum, and a new lover who has a reputation for being a feminist lawyer. By coincidence, Ivan's son Carlos wants to lease Pepa's apartment with his Picaso-esque girlfriend Paulina, who must be one of the few people



Pedro Almodovar (pointing), director of "Women on The Verge"

in the world to have a perfectly straight, vertical nose. They arrive just in time to save Pepa's best friend from throwing herself off the apartment balcony because she is depressed that her latest lover is a Shiite terrorist and neglected to tell her.

And on it goes. The strange thing is that the story really does not seem that complicated while it is unraveling. And I have not even mentioned the spiked gazpacho or the motorcycle chase.

Almodovar is so supremely confident about the twists and turns of his characters and his story that he makes it seem like a most obvious and uncomplicated set of events. The very fact that he can get all his main characters and a few extras into the same room and not make it seem unlikely or awkward is quite masterful. Not only is it a credit to the control Almodovar has over his film, but also an indication of the skill he has developed in his technique since "Law of Desire."

Almodovar's confidence stretches to the way he has made his picture look. It ought to be disturbing that Pepa's apartment is so blatant a set; you can almost see the paint of the Madrid skyline in the background. The colors throughout the film make it seem like a walk through something out of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. This weird feeling of artificiality, however, only enhances the manic world of the characters, and in turn, the wonderful humor and idiocy of the whole sordid tale.

Aside from the vertical nose, the star of the whole show is Carmen Maura as Pepa. Maura already showed her versatility as a comic actor as the lesbian transsexual in "Law of Desire." But as Pepa, she finds a remarkable consistency and credibility in a difficult role that she has to achieve for the story to succeed since she is rarely off the screen. She is ably supported by a cast of actors many of whom have been in Almodovar's earlier films. Most notable is

Julieta Serrano, who, as Lucia, Ivan's insane ex-lover with the makeup and wardrobe to prove it, walks into the story for the film's finale with all the power and presence of a reincarnated female Frankenstein. It is a marvel to watch all the characters interact, and a credit to all the actors that they can convincingly pull off the extraordinary events of this wonderfully weird story.

With "Women on the Verge," Almodovar has become the first auteur European director to make a name for himself in the United States in quite a while. His predecessors came from the New German Cinema in the form of Fassbinder and Herzog. With them, Almodovar shares a definite vision for his films, which he develops without compromise or apology. However, he does not share their bleak view of a dark world. His world is a crazy place, where stranger souls are given free rein. And in "Women on the Verge," it is a sheer joy to watch.

Random Thoughts

Presidents, problems and past paper people

By ELIZABETH ELLEN
Staff Writer

It's not what you know. It's who you know.

If what I know is it, then I'm in big trouble. I don't know whether orange the fruit was named for orange the color or the other way 'round, or if the true origin of the word "orange" has something to do with the dude for whom this fair county was named.

It's not who you know. It's who I know.

And even given a lively assortment of glittering and/or disgusting friends and acquaintances, nothing is guaranteed. In this life, chance plays its merry games with our psyches and our bowling averages. One day you are striking and the next, all you get is gutter balls.

Speaking of the gutter, looks like John Tower is heading that way, boys and girls. The man has pulled

out all the stops by promising never to touch another drop of alcohol so long as he and George Bush shall live, cross his heart and hope to die, stick a nuclear warhead in his eye, amen sister, if the Senate will have mercy on a poor alcoholic with suspicious ties to various defense contractors and confirm him as Button Pusher #2. Remember the song "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands"?

(The president probably gets first crack at the super-funky button-pushing job, although the Constitution is a bit unclear about this. Ben Franklin voted that his candidate for national bird, the turkey, should have dibs on the button. A drunken brawl ensued at The Convention over this issue. Madison reports that a compromise was reached when the liquor ran out. Actually, two compromises were made at this point of ensuing drought: the aforemen-

tioned one and the famous three-fifths compromise, which resulted from a dispute over how much more liquor could be purchased with public funds.)

It's not who you know or who I know. It's who you don't know.

This applies to the Malays, who run amok with wild abandon. I really do not know them, and even if I did, I'd probably pretend I didn't.

It's not who you know or don't know. It's how long you can hold out.

As I babble on paper yet again this week, I write under the auspices of my sixth DTH administration. Yes, I've seen editors come and go: Hiday, Schmidt and Rickert, Zook, Gerber, Lutes, and now Keschull. I am the kudzu of DTH staffers.

Allow me to share an old arts desk tradition with you, the reader with a zest for kinky mind-teasing. Assignment sheets began

with a DTH Musical Trivia Quiz of the Week. Today I discovered an artifact from last February still stored in the computer system. Consider, if you will, who sang these lyrics and in which songs they appeared.

1. "Even an inferno can cool down to an ember."


2. "What good are notebooks if they won't help me survive?"

3. "We drown our doubts in dry champagne and soothe our souls with fine cocaine."

4. "I believe in coyotes and time as an abstract."

Synthesis is the highest form of knowledge. Let's all get drunk, toast notebooks over a roaring bonfire, and abstract time to the point of rendering watches Swiss anachronisms.

Sometimes it's not who or what you know or don't know, nor how long you hold out, but how bizarre you can be without realizing it.



PYEWACKET
RESTAURANT

CONTINENTAL
CUISINE

FEATURING:
Grilled Seafood
Fresh Pasta
International Specials
Elegant Desserts

929-0297
THE COURTYARD - CHAPEL HILL

