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# 'Kika' collapses under the weight of its own clutter

By Janet Maslin  
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**P**EDRO Almodovar continues to give new meaning to the phrase screwball comedy with his antic, gleefully fashion-conscious bedroom farces, each of which has its own lovingly developed kinky streak.

Almodovar's new "Kika" finds the filmmaker working in a relatively innocent vein, which means only voyeurism, self-flagellation, a slapstick rape sequence, and an orange section used as a sexual device.

Orange section? Don't ask. Viewers familiar with Almodovar's work probably won't have to.

"Kika" is actually one of this filmmaker's more buoyant recent efforts, a sly, rambunctious satire that moves along merrily until it collapses under the weight of its own clutter.

Like "High Heels," its dourer 1991 predecessor, this film insists on incorporating a darker murder plot that weighs down its giddier aspects. As such, the murder story is superfluous. Almodovar invests even his films' zanier elements with serious meaning, and those lighter ingredients are a lot more fun.

At the film's center is the title character, a dizzy, good-hearted bombshell who works as a makeup artist and whose ingenuous sexiness affects everyone she meets.

Even Ramon, a corpse whom Kika (Veronica Forque) has been hired to paint, responds to her effervescent chatter. It turns out that Ramon has only been in a cataleptic trance. Still, Kika's friendliness is enough to wake the dead.

Kika quickly sets up house-keeping with Ramon (Alex Casanovas), who specializes in taking fashion photographs of lingerie-clad models and who takes Polaroids even when in bed with Kika.

Voyeurism also guides many of the film's other characters, like Andrea Scarface (Victoria Abril), an evil television star. Andrea is the hostess of "Today's Worst," a program specializing in real-life crime scenes.

"Today's Worst" is one of the better touches in "Kika," thanks to Jean-Paul Gaultier's dazzlingly outlandish costumes for Abril.

Andrea and Kika eventually cross paths when Kika is raped, in the kind of bawdy comedy-of-errors sequence that separates Almodovar's admirers from those of fainter heart. Let's just say that if anyone can stage a laugh-inducing rape scene, it's he.

Also ricocheting through "Kika" is Peter Coyote as Nicholas Pierce, an American author who is Ramon's widowed stepfather and Kika's sometime lover.

Then there is Juana, a servant played by the unforgettably strange-looking Rossy de Palma, whose dream is to become a prison matron and who lets her comically bestial brother have sex with her just to keep him from hurting the neighbors.

Comically bestial? Even this, by the standards of earlier Almodovar films, is relatively tame. And Almodovar has a way of making such excesses work.

## REVIEW

- "Kika"
- Starring Veronica Forque, Peter Coyote, Victoria Abril and Alex Casanovas
- Directed by Pedro Almodovar
- Rated NC-17
- Playing at the Act Theater in Berkeley, the Lumiere in San Francisco and Aquarius in Palo Alto
- ★★ (Lively but cluttered)

It helps that "Kika" is alive with loud colors, knickknack-filled sets and tarty costumes, some of which have also been supplied by Gianni Versace.

The two principal stars, Forque and Abril, are spirited and appealing, never in danger of being overpowered by their surroundings.