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MOVIES

TIE ME UP! TIE ME DOWN!

Directed and written by Pedro Almodóvar. Produced by El Deseo, S.A. With Victoria Abril, Antonio Banderas, Francisco Rabal, Loles Leon, Julieta Serrano, Maria Barranco, Rossy De Palma, and Lola Cardona. At the Emery Bay and United Artists.

By Kelly Vance

They used to call him the "Spanish Fassbinder," but after the success of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and the advance notoriety of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* they call him Mister All-Moe-DOUGH-Bär. That's Madrid's camp kingpin Pedro Almodóvar, who in his eighth feature film softens the edges of his obsessions considerably only to be denied an MPAA "R" rating for what is, essentially, a tender tale of love. It only looks like a violent, misogynistic sex shocker from the outside.

If you strip away the mock high-fashion milieu, the bitchy jokes, the kitchen sink depravity which has become an integral part of his work, and of course the ropes, this is a Doris Day-Rock Hudson comedy. In fact, Almodóvar has never strayed very far from the overly glossy, garishly lit film form of Hollywood and Cinecittà in the '50s and '60s. His characters may practice drug abuse, murder for sport, homosexuality, incest, church sacrilege, and other nominal outrages, but in the end they're just parodying romantic comedy elements from the high-water mark of movie artifice. Almodóvar's only similarity to R.W. Fassbinder is his hangup on soapy sociology. (Their common sexual orientations are a given.)

Stylistically, he's a hybrid of Mario Monicelli, Frank Tashlin, Blake Edwards, and Fellini, with a dash of Vincente Minnelli carried out to absurd lengths. Most importantly, his writing is usually hilarious. Because of this, it's easy to laugh expectantly at the gyrations of the unlikely lovers of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* before we realize that Almodóvar is, in his curious way, sincere about them. As the Francisco Rabal character, a sleazy director named Maximo Espejo, would say, Almodóvar puts his heart and genitals into his work. *Atame!* (the Spanish title), for all its ornamental kinkiness, contains more of the former. For a filmmaker who usually wears his genitals on his sleeve, this is a miscalculation.

The scenario probably won't win any achievement awards from anti-porno bluenoses. It concerns a newly released mental patient, one Ricky (Almodóvar regular Antonio

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Banderas) who has formed a twisted fixation on softcore porn actress Marina (Victoria Abril, looking very much like a seedy Rosanna Arquette). On the basis of a one-night stand years before, Ricky conceives a fantasy in which if he can only capture Marina and confess his love, she will give up her drug-addicted, oversexed life and settle down with him. Of course this is exactly what happens. It's a send-up of *The Collector*. Ricky stalks Marina, breaks into her apartment, binds and gags (but doesn't rape) her, buys her some drugs, and wins her devotion. It turns out that they're a perfect match and only needed the rough stuff to reveal it to them, as a sort of psychic and physical warm-up for the main event.

Next to the proclivities of previous Almodóvar characters, Ricky and Marina's horsing around is tame. In the first place, it's monogamously heterosexual. No sex changes (*Law of Desire*), ritual

sadomasochistic murders (*Matador*), or religious satire (*Dark Habits*), either. In fact, it's difficult to single out the scenes which crossed the MPAA's line. Ricky's assault on Marina is graphically violent, but no more so than what we've seen lately from, say, Uli Edel or Sidney Lumet. When Marina finally awakens, in an impossibly corny and sardonic moment, to Ricky's love, they have a fairly hot sex scene, the sort of upper-torso crab walk Ellen Barkin perfected for *The Big Easy* and *Sea of Love*, but nothing remarkably salacious.

Tie Me Up! seems to have been singled out, like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, for going outside the bounds of Hollywood sexual taste. All three films were deemed too extreme to receive the industry's "R" rating, but none of them opted for the box-office poison "X" designation. Interestingly, all three films are independent releases, which are perhaps more in-

tently scrutinized than comparable major distributor releases (which is essentially the gist of the suit filed by Almodóvar, seeking to create a new, non-porno adult rating).

Outsiders are expected to be bold, but they still have to sell tickets, something Almodóvar did with *Women on the Verge*. Ratings aside, it's too early to tell if he's resting on his laurels already, but *Tie Me Up!* just isn't as inspired as his other films, in the writing or the acting.

Abil's Marina is an early burn-out who relieves the boredom of her trashy film career by popping pills and shooting "caballo." In the Almodóvar tradition of actresses like Cecilia Roth, Assumpta Serna, and super-everywoman Carmen Maura, she dominates. Horny old director Maximo itches to get at her, while Ricky (in disguise with a wig) gets the brushoff at the film studio. Almodóvar's little joke is that Marina is a plain country girl seemingly waiting for a plain country

lummock to tie her down to home and hearth. Abril isn't capable of that kind of comic complexity. Whenever she's on screen with vacuum-packed Loles Leon, in the role of Lola, she comes across as little more than a slice of cheesecake.

Boyish psycho Ricky, with his Alex Baldwin *Miami Blues* crewcut and affectless bravado, shows Almodóvar's weakness in drawing believable male characters. When the emotion heats up, Ricky dissolves into sugar. Almodóvar comes to the rescue, as usual, with sight gags like the wheelchair dance and parodies like the Geribank TV commercial, but Banderas is left flapping in the breeze in a way he wasn't in either *Law of Desire* or *Matador*. The baffled Lola gasps: "How could you fall in love with a guy who kidnapped you and beat you up?" and neither Marina nor Ricky has an answer. Their internal logic just isn't up to *Pillow Talk* level, it seems.

Almodóvar's cause is further hampered by the music score, a laughably drippy dirge for strings by Ennio Morricone which plods ahead of Marina and Ricky's tentative clowning. The only scene in which it completely works is in the bedroom/keys confrontation, where the calm, restful music contrasts with the victim's near-hysteria. That scene, with Marina trussed up and wordlessly pleading with Ricky to let her escape, is the turning point of the film. When Almodóvar loses his stylistic nerve there, in the tensest part of the couple's foreplay, the rest of the movie follows. The director, ignoring the incredulity of his smarter characters, plows ahead with his fantasies, very much in the manner of Bertrand Blier's sex comedies, into a place somewhere over the satiric rainbow where women fall in love with their kidnappers and say "Tie me up, darling!" Even from a filmmaker notorious for operating without restraints, this latest Almodóvar is too much of a whopper.