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BY J. HOBERMAN

WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS

BREAKDOWN. Written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Produced by El Deseo, S.A./Laurenfilm. Released by Orion Classics. At the Cinema Studio.

SPIKE OF BENSONHURST. Directed by Paul Morrissey. Written by Alan Bowne and Morrissey. Produced by David Weisman. Released by FilmDallas.

As crowd-pleasing as it is color-coordinated, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* promises to be Pedro Almodóvar's greatest hit—even though the movie's biggest joke is that, unlike *What Have I Done To Deserve This?*, *Law of Desire*, *Dark Habits*, and *Matador*, it's not black comedy. On the contrary, the color is more of a dusty pinkish orange and the mode, high sitcom. In the current *Premiere*, Almodóvar explains that he wanted to make a movie in "the style of the late '50s, like *How To Marry a Millionaire*. . . . Elegant, well-dressed women talking about men in a fantastic penthouse with artificial views of the town." Given the genre, "you can't include blowjobs or dope. It violates the aesthetic."

Almodóvar's aesthetic used to be the absence of one, but, like *Hairspray*, *Women on the Verge* is into safe sex. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), the movie offers Almodóvar's flashiest filmmaking. The opening 10-minute montage is superbly disjunctive, full of fancy De Palma angles and outrageously skewed clichés, including a hilarious hall-of-mirrors bit from *Johnny Guitar*. Having established an appropriately hysterical tone, Almodóvar makes the rest of this Necco-colored movie a relentless mix of artifice and nature. As the soap star Pepa Marcos, Carmen Maura plays a scene with a live chicken against the pho-niest studio skyline since the "Mac Tonight" TV spot. An architect's model substitutes for her apartment's exteriors, and, when on the street, she's invariably picked up by Mambo Taxi, a leopardskin pillbox hat on wheels driven by a peroxide blond *bon vivant* who stocks his cab with pharmaceuticals and posts a sign to

thank fares for smoking.

That *gracias por fumar* is there for us. Almodóvar, who started out in Super 8 and used to sing with a rock band, is the latest director to be nourished on the late hippie amalgum of underground comics, queer theater, midnight movies, and the Catholic church. His peers include George Kuchar, Werner Schroeter, and John Waters, but Almodóvar is Mediterranean. There's something incorrigibly sunny and generous about his disposition; he'd like the audience to have fun. A "musical" without music, *Women on the Verge* resembles Godard's *A Woman Is a*

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Woman—only it's sweet fizz instead of sour grapes. There's a utopian feeling to this mall-like Madrid, full of smartly patterned shopping bags and vibrantly plastic doodads.

At its best, *Women on the Verge* is a carnival of grand gestures and outlandish costumes. Household appliances are practically characters in themselves, forever whizzing out windows and hitting the street. Almodóvar's women—always somewhat clownish with their wig hats and facials—are here triumphs of mannerist couture. Pepa's plaintive friend (Maria Barranco) trips through a garbage dump in a toga-like micromini, her Disney burro puss set off by dangling espresso-pot earrings. The even more elongated Rossy De Palma, who first appeared as an obnoxious TV reporter in *Law of Desire*, is a blood-red apparition with the spectacularly mangled profile of a mid-period Picasso. Everyone is dressed to kill except Julieta Serrano, whose homicidal madness is amply telegraphed by her frumpy lack of style.

Having previously served Almodóvar as a nun, a hausfrau, a social worker, and, most spectacularly, a transsexual, La Maura here plays a diva who has been abandoned by her faithless lover and is trying to reach him by phone. The situation is lifted from Cocteau's one-woman

show *The Human Voice*, already celebrated in *Law of Desire*. (The film version, with Anna Magnani, is screening November 27 at the Museum of Modern Art.) Less a homage than a critique, Almodóvar's version is full of jokey permutations—instead of a pet dog, Pepa keeps a roof coop of chickens. The play's unheard male protagonist becomes an actor who is almost all voice. He not only dubs movies, but fills Pepa's answering machine with duplicitous messages. The main change, however, is in the nature of the heroine.

Pepa may be perched on spike heels and wrapped in Spain's tightest tube skirt, but she's all action. (The movie's not just Almodóvar's mambo taxi, it's her pink Cadillac.) Rolling her eyes and flashing her legs, turning on the charm or tossing in the towel, Maura is the embodiment of star temperament—a faster, hipper, less self-righteous Joan Crawford. In a way, this hyped-up performance allows Almodóvar to combine *The Human Voice* with *Johnny Guitar*. Certainly there's a comparable burst of heat. "I shouldn't smoke," Pepa sighs, after inadvertently setting her bed aflame and triggering a burst of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol." The image is as spectacular in its way as any conflagration in *Ran* or *Rambo*, where the director only gets one take to make it right.

Women on the Verge is convoluted but compact—nearly every strand in its sitcom plot is wound together in a web of coincidence. Still, nothing fulfills the bang-bang promise of the first 40 minutes. (Losing momentum midway, as everyone converges on Pepa's penthouse, the movie doesn't end so much as wind down.) A celebrant of erotic fetishes and impulse behavior, Almodóvar is more adroit at setting up individual shots than managing narrative structures. He's a vaudevillian—which is probably why obsessive one-gag films like the ragged, overlong *Dark Habits* and the svelte, near-pornographic *Matador* seem his cruelest, most intractable works. They push a joke so far it crashes through some sort of psychological barrier to become a ^{way}

of life. *Women on the Verge* stops short at the edge.