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MOVIES

WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

Written and directed by Pedro Almodovar. With Carmen Maura, Antonio Banderas, Julieta Serrano, Maria Barranco, Rossy De Palma, Guillermo Montesinos, Kiti Manver. At Act One.

WORKING GIRL

Directed by Mike Nichols. Written by Kevin Wade. With Melanie Griffith, Sigourney Weaver, Harrison Ford, Alec Baldwin, Philip Bosco, Joan Cusack. At Grand Lake, UA.

By Michael Covino

Writer-director Pedro Almodovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* makes so many crisscrossing comic connections—and makes them with such hopeful franticness—that afterwards you're amazed you were able to follow it at all. Pepa (Carmen Maura) is an actress who makes her living dubbing films. Her lover, the vain, courtly, older Ivan (Fernando Guillen), dubs films too. One day he calls up out of the blue and tells her—or rather, tells her answering machine—that he's leaving. She falls apart. She can no longer stand her beautiful balcony apartment—too many memories—so she puts it up for rent. On top of that she's recently learned she's pregnant. On top of that she'd just like to be left alone but other women with problems of a different magnitude keep dropping by.

There's Candela (Maria Barranco), a miniskirted model who recently had an affair with a Moslem—terrific in the sack, best lay she ever had, etc., etc.—but she didn't realize till late in the day that he was a Shiite terrorist who had turned her apartment into his group's base of operations. *Men!* Now the cops are after her and she's hysterical. But who cares! Not Pepa, she has her own problems.

Then there's Lucia (Julieta Serrano), gun-wielding Lucia, who had

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Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

an affair with Ivan twenty years earlier and went crazy when he left her. She still dresses like it's twenty years ago too (lingering great expectations?). She had a son with Ivan—a son Ivan never told Pepa about—but then, *amazing coincidence*, the son comes by to inquire about the apartment she just put on the market because his dad left her. The son seems genetically disposed toward rascality too. After his girlfriend conks out on barbiturate-spiked gazpacho, he starts flirting with Candela. Then when a repair man comes by to fix the phone (that Pepa has torn out of the wall, had repaired, then smashed again), Pepa tries fixing him up with the son's girlfriend.

That's the movie, mad comings and goings, people hurling monologues at one another, hurling telephones and answering machines out of windows, rushing to catch flights that Shiite terrorists have designs on. *Women on the Verge* possesses—and it is a *possessed* movie—the sort of crazed comic energy, the

screwball surrealism, of an Abrams and Zucker brothers movie, like *Ruthless People*, where the most unlikely events connect in the most haphazard way...and you the viewer would never think to accuse the filmmaker of playing foul (he does it all so slyly).

It's an amazing movie, full of vitality, all the more so for showing women acting shamelessly, with no sense of pride, making fools of themselves, tripping around on high heels and in ridiculously tight skirts...and yet somehow they come out better than the men, more graceful, with far more dignity. How Almodovar pulls this off... but then we are talking of the secrets of the art. The movie has an incredibly vibrant appearance—screeching primary colors that look like someone just let them out of a cage, huge apartments with fantastic views. Everything's carried to extremes: the comic connections, the interior decoration of taxicabs, the way a telephone hurled out a window lands on the right windshield, the way the doorbell's always ringing or the phone's

always ringing (if it's plugged in and not broken). It's pageantry on spiked punch, melodrama gone psychedelic, Douglas Sirk with a sense of humor. It's a completely shameless movie, a *happily* shameless movie by a man who loves his work, who's energized by it. And it's lighthearted. As much as it's a war-of-the-sexes movie, it's lighthearted while refusing to trivialize things. None of Almodovar's previous films, *Dark Habits*, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, *Matador*, and *Law of Desire*, have quite gone over the top the way this one does. In Spain it has proved to be the biggest box office smash in that country's history.

Almodovar is the anarchic product of that country's giddy sense of release following the death of Franco and the collapse of fascism. A flamboyant homosexual who is loved by the Spanish public, Almodovar started out contributing comic strips and stories to underground publications. Later, he created a personage, an international porno star, whose periodic confessions appeared in a regular newspaper where they became tremendously popular. He started working in

The most ridiculous coincidences in *Women on the Verge* come out hilariously; in *Working Girl* they seem horribly contrived.

theater and shooting films in super-8 and singing and acting. The idea that a character like Almodovar could achieve such mass adoration in Spain in just a little more than a decade after the collapse of fascism while in the United States, after two centuries of democracy—well, never mind.

One other strange thing: when you think back on this picture, you don't even remember it was subtitled, you don't even remember reading it. That's how fast it seems to move.