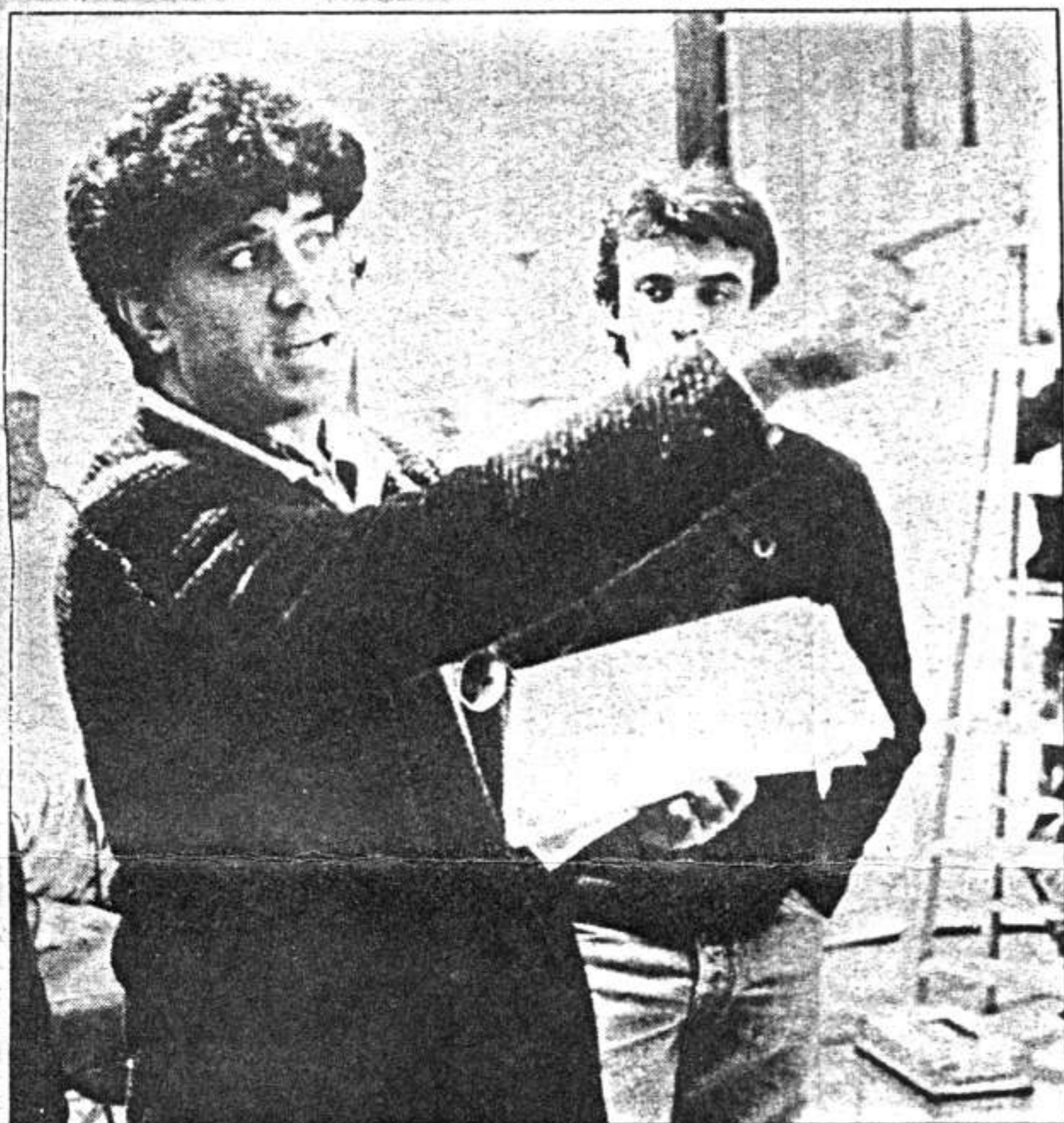


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Director Pedro Almodóvar on the set of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.

# THE MAN BEHIND 'WOMEN'

Director Pedro Almodóvar is  
on the verge of greatness

By Steve Warren

**H**AVING LEARNED what impresses us crazy *Americanos*, Pedro Almodóvar, speaking by phone from a suite at the Sunset Marquis in Los Angeles, calmly recites the figures surrounding his film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al Borde de un Ataque de Nervios*) in his native Spain: "*Law of Desire* [also by Almodóvar] was the most commercially successful Spanish movie of last year, but *Mujeres* is a phenomenon. *Law of Desire* made \$2 million, *Mujeres* has made more than \$5 million. It is the most successful movie in the history of Spanish cinema." Not surprisingly, it's also Spain's entry for the 1989 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

It's hard to sound humble when you're citing statistics like that about yourself, but two factors help Almodóvar to maintain his perspective. Aside from New York, where the film opened spectacularly last month, *Women* has yet to prove itself at the American box office. Some of his earlier films (*Law of Desire*, *Matador*, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*) have performed respectably here and he's become something of a critics' darling, but he's still waiting for his first unqualified hit in this country.

That question will soon be answered, one way or another; but the other will take a bit longer: What will Almodóvar do for an encore? He says he's working on a new script, and that it's "going to be more rough than *Mujeres*, more like *Law of Desire* and *What Have I Done . . . ?*"

In the latter, Carmen Maura, who also stars in *Women*, played a poor housewife who sells her 12-year-old son to a gay male dentist while her 14-year-old, a drug dealer, takes care of his grandmother. *Law of Desire* was about

a man obsessively in love with another man who feels the same way about a third man. The man in the middle has a transsexual sister (Maura again) whose lesbian lover left her a daughter to raise.

After those two and *Matador*, in which the title character, who murders his sexual partners at the moment of climax, falls in love with a woman with the same eccentricity, with predictable consequences, it wasn't difficult for *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* to be tame by comparison. It may also be Almodóvar's first film with no homosexual characters.

"In Spain there are not gay directors and heterosexual directors," says Almodóvar, who is gay, sounding tired of explaining the point. "There are gay and heterosexual people, but to be gay there is not so different like here. Everyone mixes. There are not the [gay] political organizations." Later he qualifies that, saying they exist, "but they are weak." He claims he is not trying through his films to exorcise the repressive demon of Franco: "When I started to make movies I just forgot that, very easily. The type of life we [have] now in Spain has changed so much."

**B**ORN IN La Mancha in southwestern Spain in 1951, Almodóvar left home in 1968 and moved to Madrid, where he still lives. He says it's the most liberal city in Spain. Although "you can find everything in Barcelona too, the atmosphere is more exciting in Madrid."

He worked for the telephone company for ten years while exploring a number of creative outlets on the side. He wrote stories, articles and underground comix, worked with a theater group (where he met Maura), composed and performed music, acted in films and made his own Super-8 films. In 1980 this renaissance man released his first theatrical feature, *Pepi, Lucy,*

*Bom and Other Girls Like Mom*, and he's made almost one a year since then. They've increased steadily in quality and professionalism, but Almodóvar says they haven't gotten easier. Because everyone, including himself, expects more of him, "I find it more difficult to make a movie than before."

Nor have his budgets increased with success. "When I decide to make a picture in Spain with Spanish actors," he says, that puts an automatic ceiling on the budget. That doesn't necessarily mean he'd like to work in America, although he thinks he will eventually — "but this is not the moment. . . . I would like more to work with American actors than to make films here," he says. Asked to mention some he'd like to direct, he comes up with an eclectic list: "Karen Black, Lesley Ann Warren, Dennis Quaid, Melanie Griffith, Sean Young and Robert de Niro."

Working with local actors in Spain, Almodóvar says, his primary expenses are time and film stock. He uses many of the same people repeatedly, largely out of necessity. "You need to change, too," he says, but "there are not many good actors in Spain."

Carmen Maura is certainly among the best of them, and excels at portraying the passionate women Almodóvar creates. He admits his work is motivated by "an obsession with passion, a passion for everything . . . the intensity of every moment." Expanding on a previous statement, "Women cry better [than men]," he adds, "The pain is the same when someone abandons you. We're made of the same material. But women are not afraid to act the fool. Women are more spontaneous in that situation. Men, we suffer, but we don't let it show. . . . It's something cultural. Men are more dual in their reactions."

Almodóvar showed his own duality in his inspirations for *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. One was Jean Cocteau's *La Voix Humaine* (*The Human Voice*), a dramatic telephone monologue by a woman addressing her faithless lover; the other the glossy Hollywood comedy *How to Marry a Millionaire*, about three husband-hunting women sharing an apartment.

The campily serious tone of *Women* is set by a torch song played behind the opening credits, Mexican *ranchera* queen Lola Beltrán singing "*Soy Infeliz*" ("I'm Unhappy"). "It's like the overture in an opera," Almodóvar explains. "She represents all the female voices in the film." He bought the Beltrán record in New York, he says, as most Mexican music has not been popular in Spain since the 1950s.

The lover who has driven Pepa (Maura) to the verge by avoiding her is not evil, Almodóvar says, but a product of his culture. "Ivan's is very typical machismo behavior, at least in Spain. He's a man who doesn't know how to say goodbye. . . . It's a very obvious kind of hypocrisy, but he's trying to be nice." Pepa gains strength by building a support group of other women who have been hurt by men, or soon will be. As their personal tragedies mount in intensity, her apartment fills with people like the Marx Brothers' stateroom and the situation becomes farcical.

It's only in the treatment, not the basic plot, that the writer-director applies his by-now-expected outrageousness. Still, he doesn't find the movie as mild as some people do. "I don't think *Mujeres* is conventional at all," he says. "It's more personal than my other films, but it's the same Almodóvar as always."

Asked in closing if he has an "impossible dream," this man of La Mancha thinks for a moment before replying, "Like in *Matador* — one absolute pleasure." If the outcome will be equally fatal, let's hope he gives us many more films before his dream comes true. ■