

Almodóvar ' s Women on the Verge in Portugal

By Duncan Wheeler



Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, by Pedro Almodóvar. Photo: Teatro Politeama.

Nearly three and a half decades ago, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) broke box-office records in Spain and marked filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar ' s US commercial breakout. Depicting life in post-Francoist Madrid, the Spanish director ' s control of pathos, humour and music was compared favourably with contemporary Hollywood releases such as the Madonna star-vehicle, *Who ' s That Girl* (James Foley, 1987). A post-modern heir to cinematic screwball comedy and musicals like *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957), the Oscar-nominated film signified a theatrical turn in Almodóvar ' s scriptwriting with clear nods to Cocteau ' s *La voix humaine* and, via a magic potion of doped gazpacho, Shakespeare ' s *A Midsummer Night ' s Dream*

For his English-language debut, Almodóvar returned to the familiar theatrical source material with a thirty-minute modern-day film adaptation of *The Human Voice* (2020) starring Tilda Swinton. *Mujeres al borde un ataque de nervios* retains a privileged place within the oeuvre of a director now internationally feted as the cinematic laureate of frustrated female desire. A small-screen adaptation for Apple TV starring Gina Rodríguez is in production whilst a version in

Portuguese, first staged in Brazil, of an English-language musical production that failed to seduce audiences on Broadway or the West End opened in Lisbon in the summer of 2022. The musical's absence of memorable songs was intimated by the speakers outside the Teatro Politeama blasting out music from the film's iconic soundtrack as opposed to David Yazbek's compositions for the stage show. For the London production, the casting of Tamsin Greig in the lead role of Pepa (so memorably played by Carmen Maura in the film) had a solid commercial rationale, but the actress's limited vocal abilities resulted in a production which played better when the services of her understudy were called upon. In Lisbon, the cast were better singers than actors. In the lead role was Paula Sá, whose career began as a teenager in televised music talent competitions. Her resume includes being the protagonist in a musical about legendary Portuguese Fado singer, Amália Rodrigues. Physically resembling Griffin Dunne (who embodied the hapless lover of the character played by Madonna in *Who's that Girl*) more than the Malaga-born Antonio Banderas, who played the cinematic Carlos, the inability of Felipe de Albuquerque to conceal nervous tics indicated a lack of basic technique as opposed to immersion in method acting.

One suspects Almodóvar, who exercises tight control over his brand, would not have licensed such a low-cost production (in which, for example, the musicians were inelegantly cramped in a makeshift orchestra pit) for primary markets. The presence of Patti LuPone was insufficient to save the original 2010 Broadway production from poor ticket sales and scathing reviews. With the most expensive seats priced at 30 Euros, the admittedly limited merits of the musical came more readily to the fore in a front of a half-empty but enthusiastic audience in a mid-size Italian-style theatre located in the tourist centre of Lisbon. At least on the night I attended, the promise of multilingual surtitles in French, English and Spanish (which, in reality, summarised as opposed to translating the dialogue) were largely unnecessary given that the audience members were overwhelmingly Portuguese.

Cultural and geographical proximity to Spain resulted in less clichéd cultural signposting and stereo-typing (the London production had opened with a character in a bullfighting suit writing "Madrid, 1987" on a blackboard). Subtler references were made to the *Movida*, what Peter W. Evans memorably characterized as a sort of Punk-Pop Spanish equivalent of the Bloomsbury set, made up of young artists and radicals who took full advantage of the liberties afforded by the nascent democracy. A large screen at the rear of the stage projected images of Madrid albeit with a confused and confusing approach to chronology given that it included shots of the iconic Richard Rogers airport terminal that did not open until 2006. Greater care was taken as regards costume design (including a taurine-inspired catwalk outfit reminiscent of the irreverent take on Spanish clichés championed by the *Movida* set) and *mise-en-scène* of the interior scenes in the flat where much of the action of Almodóvar's narrative unfolds. If the movie were made on a much tighter budget than many of the filmmaker's subsequent productions, imagination here went some way to disguising the musical's financial constraints. The terrace balcony was, for example, hoisted upwards to provide the setting Candela's thwarted suicide attempt, but a carefully timed interval did away with the need to find a scenic resolution to the situation. The curtain simply fell and, as the second half opened, Candela had been returned to the safety of the flat's living space.

Although the familiarity with the cinematic source text was not necessary to follow Jeffrey Lane's

book for the musical, the Portuguese production rewarded Almodóvar aficionados. The large screen allowed for an almost exact reproduction of the scenes where Pepa and long-term lover Iván are dubbing English-language films into Castilian Spanish. Recreated in period detail were Lucía 's retro (even for the 1980s) wardrobe and motorbike – images of her from the original film were sufficiently iconic to have been used to promote the documentary, *El viaje de Julia* (Pancho García Matienzo, 2022), about the actress, Julieta Serrano, who made the character her own. Whilst Almodóvar 's sub-plot with Islamic terrorists was afforded less prominence, the less politically sensitive character of a Mambo-loving taxi driver was extended in crowd-pleasing vignettes featuring João Frizza addressing the audience directly. Whilst these scenes delighted the indulgent audience who laughed at the slightest pretext, they extended the musical 's already over-long running time.

That previous stage productions of *Mujeres* as well as a 2007 production of the Oscar-winning *Todo sobre mi madre/All about my Mother* (1999) at the Young Vic have all been significantly longer than the films from which they draw. This is symptomatic of theatre practitioners not yet having touched on a formula capable of replicating Almodóvar 's cinematic cocktail of concision, comprehensibility and complexity for the stage. This latest Lusophone venture is not the most professional Almodóvar adaptation, and yet its transparent lack of pretensions delivered the most straightforwardly enjoyable, albeit largely forgettable, night I have spent to date watching the master filmmaker being given a theatrical makeover.

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