

✓ **Volver (15)**

21st April 2008

Director: **Pedro Almodóvar**
Spain 2006

Running time : 121 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Penélope Cruz** (Raimunda), **Carmen Maura** (Irene), **Lola Dueñas** (Sole), **Blanca Portillo** (Agustina), **Yohana Cobo** (Paula).

SCRIPT: **Pedro Almodóvar**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **José Luis Alcaine**. EDITING: **José Salcedo**. MUSIC: **Alberto Iglesias**.

Note: this review gives away information some would prefer not to know before viewing.

Volver opens with an elegant, fluid tracking shot past tombstones and we take in a scene of busy domestic activity: headscarved housewives devotedly dusting and polishing the village cemetery. They do so against the interference of an unrelenting wind which threatens to undo their work within minutes of their leaving. We have here the essence of the director's mature films: a sanctification of woman and her endurance in the face of an implacable fate, all wrapped up with technical assurance (framing, colour, wide screen, lush music). Not for nothing has Almodóvar been called a modern Douglas Sirk (*All that Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind*, *Imitation of Life*).

Volver has been enjoyed by thousands but was famously criticized in the pages of Sight and Sound for offering nothing new, prompting a flurry of reader letters! But its title ('Going Back') in a sense announces exactly that, and it is a return in a number of ways: to its lead actresses (Maura being Pedro's muse through the early films, Cruz appearing in *Live Flesh* and *All About My Mother*), to the theme of motherhood, to the soap operatic plotting of the early films (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), and to La Mancha, Pedro's homeplace and the setting of much of *La Flor de mi Secreto*. The plot of the film also involves a return.

The story concerns Raimunda, who lives with her teenage daughter and uncouth, drunken husband (men get a bum deal in this picture). Raimunda and her sister, a hairstylist, were orphaned years ago when their parents died in a fire in their village in La Mancha. Their aunt, who still lives there, talks of their mother as if she were alive yet. Life begins to get complicated for Raimunda when her daughter stabs her father to death in the kitchen in

protection of her honour! This prompts the return to the village and a whole new set of complications.

Almodóvar marshals his elements with a practised hand, drawing accomplished performances from his actresses. Lola Dueñas is affecting as the sister, Sole; Cruz holds the film – this is her best work in years – and is all but deified by the director (apparently he had her bottom padded out to make it more shapely, and watch out for the overhead shot of her doing the washing up!); Maura in turn delivers a rustic comedy turn and submits gamely to the reverse glamour treatment as the ghostly mother.

The pace is anything but hurried, and some may find the interest flags in the second half, but Almodóvar has grown such a master of narrative that watching his stories unfold is a pleasure in itself, especially with so much talent behind, as well as in front of, the camera. One signature scene stands out as classic Almodóvar (you may remember similar ones in *High Heels* and *Talk to Her*, where a song is used for sentimental effect): it occurs when, at the opening of her restaurant, Raimunda sings a song (a career she gave up for family life) once taught her by her mother. The assembled friends, family and customers listen in appreciative recollection; this would normally be enough, but he goes further down the road of Sirkian melodrama. The mother, an oddly physical returning spirit, is in the boot of the car outside and also attends with a tear in her eye. I challenge you not to be moved in spite of the kitsch!

David Clare