Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar takes another loving look at female troubles in “Volver.”

by Thomas Peyser

The opening shots of Pedro Almodóvar’s lyrical, emotionally lush “Volver” feature a band of women, young and old, vigorously scrubbing down the tombs of their provincial town’s menfolk. Driven mad by the east winds of La Mancha (like Don Quixote, perhaps), the men die young, one of the women offhandedly explains, as if describing an affliction visited on her goats. Men, in fact, are almost entirely shooed off the screen in “Volver,” sometimes violently, the better to bring one of the great Spanish director’s abiding themes to the fore: the endurance of women and the bonds that unite them. “Volver” means “to come back,” and with this movie, Almodóvar is himself returning to the feminine world of such earlier works as “Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown” (1988) and “All About My Mother” (1999).

The plot, as is often the case in Almodóvar’s films, develops from a richly woven tapestry of raw material gleaned from soaps, tabloid television and Hollywood’s golden age. Much of the dialogue would be right at home in an over-the-top daytime drama (“After what he had done, he had to move to Venezuela”) or a weepy novel (“It hurts when a daughter doesn’t love her mother”). But these lines are surrounded by so much inspired idiocy, delivered with such conviction that somehow their hackneyed character melts away, until they glow with a genuine warmth and love difficult to resist.

Moreover, the film is graced with fine, splendidly modulated performances that alone could have carried a much weaker picture. It’s easy to see why many critics have taken to comparing Cruz to Sophia Loren in her heyday. Her Raimunda, now fiery, now vulnerable, and always fiercely protective of her daughter, is probably her richest piece of work to date. Although Cruz is certainly the star, the movie is anchored in some ways by the luminous performance of Carmen Maura as the mother apparently returned from the grave. And as a terminally ill neighbor with a mysterious link to the family (another florid subplot), Blanca Portillo has enough edge to keep the proceedings from ever veering into the merely campy or sentimental.

As always, Almodóvar lavishes appreciative attention on people improvising their lives, often a little bit outside the limits of the law, in order to preserve some measure of self-respect. This movie has a lot of respect for hardworking prostitutes, neighborly pot smokers and unlicensed cosmetologists. But it also honors the tradition-bound women of the provinces. When they march in a funeral procession, silent except for the constant fluttering of their black fans, the grave-tenders of La Mancha seem bearers of some arachic, secret and saving knowledge.

And that’s what may ultimately be most heartening in “Volver”: the idea that there are all kinds of ways to carve out something like a life for oneself and one’s family. While there’s certainly enough sorrow in “Volver” to go around, there’s also a persuasive sense that sometimes wounds can heal, even if they leave a scar. (R) 121 min. ★★★★★
Reign Over Me” begins with shots of Charlie Fineman (Adam Sandler) riding his motorized scooter all over New York at night, through streets wide and narrow. Isolated, bedraggled and vulnerable, he seems to embody the wounded spirit of the city. Through a chance encounter with an old friend, Alan Johnson (Don Cheadle), we learn that Charlie lost his family in one of the 9/11 hijackings. Strong meat for a major studio release, one might think, especially since Charlie goes from being a mentally ill total wreck to being a mentally ill demi-wreck — no quick fix for his problems in sight. But lest these hints of realism be taken as a sign that “Reign Over Me” is in any regard a serious work, let it be noted that it surrounds its weighty subject with so much contrived nonsense that after a while the film feels like an affront to real suffering. Usually Hollywood indulges in flights from reality in order to make us feel good. But “Reign Over Me” is a rarity: an escapist downer.

When we meet Charlie, he has withdrawn from his sorrow into an upscale adolescence. He plays video games on his mammoth screen. He’s decorated his luxury Manhattan apartment with a life-size Colonel Sanders. He plays drums in a cover band. So completely has he erased his problems in sight. But lest these hints of realism be taken as a sign that “Reign Over Me” is in any regard a serious work, let it be noted that it surrounds its weighty subject with so much contrived nonsense that after a while the film feels like an affront to real suffering. Usually Hollywood indulges in flights from reality in order to make us feel good. But “Reign Over Me” is a rarity: an escapist downer.

For Alan, Charlie is not merely an object of pity and concern, but an escape from the old ball-and-chain. Emboldened by his excursions into “Charlieworld,” he proclaims, “I’m not some damn Siamese twin! I’m me!” There’s a dose of liberating wisdom, writer and director Mike Bender would have us believe, in Charlie’s quasi-madness.

In the movie’s happiest moments, Charlie and Alan play Huck and Jim, with a scooter for their raft, and the canyonlike avenues of New York for their Mississippi. Here they escape from all the people trying to pull them into the world of family and adult responsibility, most of whom are women, including a dotty young beauty (Saffron Burrows) who threatens to sue Alan for sexual harassment when he turns down her creepy come-on. Very much to the film’s detriment, this seemingly tangential matter blossoms into a centerpiece of the final act.

Ultimately, both Charlie and Alan have to learn not to avoid their problems. This is ironic, given that the movie itself is unrepentantly guilty of avoidance to the last degree. Charlie finally runs afoul of the law, and in a way that, in our world, would (thankfully) land him in jail or a psychiatric ward. Instead, he’s let go and told to show up days later at a commitment hearing. The denouement includes a judge (Donald Sutherland) who puts Charlie’s fate in the hands of his mourning in-laws with the impartial words, “Ask yourself if your daughter would want Charlie locked up in a place like this,” and a therapist (Liv Tyler) who, just as appallingly, decides to play Cupid with her unstrung clients.

The shortcomings of the film cannot be laid at the door of the performers. Cheadle is, as always, most interesting to watch. Sandler, playing a fugitive from adulthood, is seldom compelled to shed his trademark persona, and thus does a passable job. The problem is the script’s childish understanding of pain. “Reign Over Me” doesn’t respect its subject, and it doesn’t trust its lead to do more than mumble, smirk and, from time to time, explode. (R) 124 min.
Shallow Waters

John Waters’ 1988 “Hairspray” gets a makeover.

by Thomas Peyser

When John Waters, the Rabelais of Baltimore, brought out “Hairspray” in 1988, it was a milestone in the mainstreaming of sleaze.

Focused on the backbiting world of a downscale, early-’60s “American Bandstand,” this cheery tale of a plussized teenager who twists her way to the top while bringing racial integration to the airwaves certainly wasn’t the assault on American sensibilities that Waters’ earlier “Pink Flamingos” (1972) and “Female Trouble” (1974) were. But “Hairspray” still managed to come off as a hymn to the louche, not least owing to the presence of Waters’ inimitable transvestite muse, Divine.

Now comes “Hairspray” the musical, via the hit Broadway production, directed by choreographer Adam Shankman. As one might expect, most of the remaining rough edges of Waters’ already toned-down vision have been scrubbed away. What remains is a mostly buoyant, candy-colored diversion, leavened by perky performances and upbeat numbers whose lyrics and melodies you’ll be hard-pressed to recall once you’ve left the theater.

The film opens with Tracy Turnblad (appealing 19-year-old newcomer Nikki Blonsky) showing us around her hum-bang shop and whose mother (an enormously padded John Travolta) is a laundress, Tracy dreams of joining the lanky kids on the local dance show, especially heartthrob Link Larkin (Zac Efron). She finds her way blocked by smart cracks about her weight and by the villain of the piece, Velma Von Tussel (Michelle Pfeiffer), who runs the operation as a showcase for her pretty, stuck-up daughter, Amber (Brittany Snow).

Sentenced to detention by unsympathetic teachers, Tracy is the only white girl in a room full of black students (it’s 1962), notably Seaweed J. Stubbs (Elijah Kelley). There she discovers a whole new repertoire of dance moves that make it to the small screen only on the dance show’s occasional “Negro Days,” presided over by a resplendent Motormouth Maybelle (Queen Latifah). When Seaweed and Tracy’s white friend Penny Pingleton (Amanda Bynes) fall for each other, the movie opens its final front against the close-mindedness that keeps the large and the dark off the airwaves, and the white and the black out of each other’s arms.

Much of the pre-release publicity has centered on Travolta, who floats through the movie like a Hindenburg in sequins. His performance, however, is more notable as a feat of engineering than of acting. Although appealing, it seldom rises above the level of an amusing stunt.

More than anything it’s the energy of the performers, rather than the script’s bite or cinematic craft, that keeps things moving along. In one of the best numbers, “I Can Hear the Bells,” Tracy imagines a romance with Link by exulting, “When we kiss in his car/Won’t go all the way/But I’ll go pretty far.” That is a high point in the lyrics. Mostly the songs are just occasions for moon/June/spoon banalities.

In the remake of “Hairspray,” a padded John Travolta ups the estrogen in a ’60s-style muumuu with sequins, while daughter Tracy (Nikki Blonsky) looks about ready to break into song.

Nowadays, filmmakers don’t get much practice at editing musicals, and it shows. During the big dance numbers, there’s an affinity for close-ups of whoever’s singing, and a disinclination to allow any wide shots to last more than...
three seconds. The result is a kinetic blur that might obscure some fine choreography. We'll never know.

The only serious missteps in the film come late. The climactic dance competition is delayed by the reigniting of Ma and Pa Turnblad's marriage, the subject of a bland little song that slows things down.

Then, when Motormouth leads a civil rights march on the TV station, the cinematography goes all serious, and shots of an unbowed Queen Latifah fade portentously to images of worn-down old men staring out of windows. That's more weight than this bouffant of a movie can bear.

Real John Waters movies suggest a tolerance grounded in the conviction that we're all battered freaks, united in our kinkiness. In the new "Hairspray," however, all that's requested is that we become part of one big happy demographic. But then, when it released "Pink Flamingos," New Line was an independent studio. Now it's a subsidiary of Time Warner. It's a new millennium. (PG) 107 min. ★ ★ ★ ★ ★