

37th International Film Festival

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The 37th International Film Festival at Goa provided a galaxy of cinema, with World Cinema, Indian Panorama, Focus on Argentina, Retrospective of Rolf de Heer (Australia), and a tribute to the Spanish actor, Javier Bardem. The quality of world cinema could have improved, if more was spent on Film rentals, and less on hospitality and festivities.

Pedro Almodovar's "Volver-To return to" (Spain, 2006, colour, 113 mins) explores family relations, death, and escape from life. Sisters Raimunda (Penelope Cruz) and Sole (Lola Duenas) are cleaning the graves of their parents, and placing fresh flowers. Stones are kept in flower vases, to prevent them from toppling over by strong winds. Three years ago the parents were reportedly burnt to death by a fire in the cottage stirred by raging winds. The gushing winds become a theme motif, with TV reports on forest fires, being driven on by stormy winds. The winds carried the cinders to the bushes. Driving back from Alcanfor La Mancha to Madrid, the landscape presents steel windmills, being revolved by winds, for wind powered energy. At Alcanfor, aunt Paula has already purchased a plot in the graveyard, to take care after life. Raimunda and Sole visit aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave), their mother's sister in Alcanfor. The TV news elaborating news on forest fires is put off by Raimunda. Her sister, Sole goes upstairs and finds a new exercise cycle, and the 'apparition' of her mother, Irene (Carmen Mavro) sitting on an easy chair, and smiling. Sole rushes downstairs. Raimunda notices the good cookies and waters on the dining table. But aunt Paula is half-blind. The sisters meet cousin Augustina (Blanca Portillo), who lives next door, and looks after aunt Paula. Augustina's mother also disappeared three years ago, but no reports were made to the police nor TV news channels. Aunt Paula informs that Irene's ghost appears occasionally.

At night the sisters return to Madrid, along with Raimunda's daughter, Paula. Raimunda's husband, Paco (Antonio de la Torre) has been drinking beer, while watching soccer on TV. He has just lost his job, and there is a quarrel with Raimunda. He watches Paula undressing from the half shut door. In bed, he masturbates, with Raimunda showing her back to him. Next morning Raimunda is back to the restaurant, where she works as a janitor. She cleans the kitchen, scrubs the floor, and washes linen in the washing machine. There is a collage of red, with a full red closeup of the body of a passing car, the advancing red double decker, Paula's red striped, red top, and Raimunda's red sweater. Returning home, Raimunda finds Paco lying dead on the kitchen floor, in a pool of blood. Paula's red clothes also have blood spills, she relates crying that Paco had jumped on her, and she had pushed him away. When he had pounced on her again, she stabbed him with the kitchen knife, Raimunda discloses to Paula, that Paco was not her father. She takes the stance that she had killed Paco.

Hurriedly Raimunda cleans the blood drenched floor, and washes the knife in the wash basin. Emilio, the restaurant owner, rings the door bell, and gives the keys of the restaurant to Raimunda, as he would be going out of Madrid. Raimunda informs that Paco is out on a job. When Emilio notices blood on Raimunda's neck, she explains it as part of woman's troubles. There is a telephone from sister conveying that cousin Augustina had telephoned aunt Paula's death. Raimunda declines to attend the funeral, citing illness. Paco's body is covered in blankets and carpets, and Raimunda and daughter Paula, drag it to the lift. The body is taken outside the villa, and dumped in the deep freeze of the store room, where Raimunda works, Raimunda and Paula hug each other. A man from a film shooting team comes early, and orders lunch for thirty people, to be served at 4 pm. Raimunda obtains pork from friend Rejina, who works at a night club, and sausages from friend, Bonita, who has just returned from the country. Sister Sole attends aunt Paula's funeral. When she returns to the villa, she finds her mother, Irene calling her. People have gathered outside on the streets to express condolences to the principal mourners Sole, and cousin Augustina. The female relatives kiss Sole. There are stories of Irene's apparition. The whole village is present, as the cortege marches through the streets the wind energy windmills reflect on the car screen, as Sole drives back to Madrid.

In Madrid, Irene who has been hiding in the car trunk, bangs to let her out. Sole finds her mother in the trunk, and they hug. Irene enters Sole's apartment with packets of clothes. Sole feels that she is still dreaming, but she gets on her mother's bed. Raimunda carries her own fridge on the elevator, and places it in the restaurant. Sole dyes her mother's hair, and cuts it in her beauty parlour. Mother Irene, poses as a Russian, who does not speak Spanish, and works at the shop. The film crew sit down for meals at Raimunda's restaurant, and money flows in. Visiting Sole's apartment, Raimunda finds old odours in the toilet and a dressing gown on a bed. Irene is hiding under the bed. There is also aunt Paula's suitcase, with antique dolls, jewels and a bible. Raimunda shifts Paco's body, locked in the freezer, to a truck, hired and driven by friend Rejina. Daughter Paula is told that Paco was not her biological father, and her actual father who lived in a village, was also dead. With pick axe and shovel, Raimunda dumps the freezer box on the banks of Jucar River, 180 kms from Madrid, at night.

Meanwhile, the film crew party progresses at night, with mojito drinks, prepared by Rejina. The end of film shooting is celebrated. Sole and mother Irene, watch from the car windows, Raimunda singing 'Coming Back' with guitar accompaniment. Irene cries, Emilio telephones from Barcelona, that he wants to sell the restaurant. Augustina who has just been operated for cancer, rings up Sole, from La Mancha. She wants to know about her own mother, who has also disappeared three years ago. Irene chats with grand daughter Paula, and discloses that she and Raimunda were estranged since Raimunda's teens. Augustina visits Raimunda, who is cutting vegetables in the kitchen. Their mothers had disappeared on the same day. There are suspicions that the death of Raimunda's parents, and disappearance of Augustina's mother are linked.

When Raimunda visits sister, Sole, she finds mother Irene, hiding under a bed. Irene confronts Raimunda, and explains the puzzle. Raimunda's father was having an affair with Augustina's mother. He was also physically abusing daughters Raimunda and Sole. One day when Raimunda's father and Augustina's mother were in embrace in a hut, Irene had set the house on fire. The lovers were smoldered in the blaze, and the fatal casualties were ascribed to the forest fire. Meanwhile Augustina is appearing on a TV chat show, and discloses her mother's disappearance. She suddenly walks off from the TV set. Irene explains to daughter Raimunda that she has returned to ask for forgiveness. There was a need to talk, but Raimunda leaves crying. She returns again, and walks along the road with her mother, who was neither dead nor a ghost. Irene feels it was easier to stay with superstitions and ghosts, than to confront truth and living purgatory. In drought hit Spain, the rivers were dry. Mother Irene wants to visit the old river, recalling picnics. The family drive to the old river, and stop at Paco's burial place. Irene also visits Augustina, after what she had done to Augustina's mother. There is re-conciliation between Irene and daughter, Raimunda with tears, Ghosts do not cry.

Almodavar builds on wounded childhood, a quest for origins, deep desires, the convulsions of love and death, and disturbing fantasies. The overwhelming female protagonists emerge with solidarity and audacity. The script is highly inventive, where the dead become relative, and the living are discussed. Archetypal women are invented, particularly with mother Irene watching Anna Magnani in Visconti's "Bellissima" (1951) on television, The dialogue is fervent and warm. Jose' Luis-Alcaine's mobile camera and Alberto Iglesias' Music evoke the natural cohabitation with the dead, the omnipresence of women, and the conversations and rumours within the walls. ✍

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