



TWO 'WOMEN ON THE VERGE': (left to right) Patti LuPone & Sherie Rene Scott in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. Photo: Paul Kolnik

Theater Review

Stage adaptation of classic Pedro Almodóvar film is musical *On the Verge* of collapsing through its countless flaws

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

Based on the film by Pedro Almodóvar

Book by Jeffrey Lane

Music & lyrics by David Yazbek

Choreography by Christopher Gattelli

Directed by Bartlett Sher

Belasco Theatre

111 West 44th Street

(212-239-6200), www.lct.org

By Scott Harrah

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar's classic 1988 farce, which received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film, may, on paper, have seemed like perfect subject matter for a Broadway musical adaptation. Its wacky plot and over-the-top characters made the film such a delight (some argue that *Women on the Verge* is Almodóvar's best work), but for some reason, as a Broadway musical, it fails on so many levels.

This production seemed to have everything going for it: big-name, Tony-winning Broadway stars such as Patti LuPone, Brian Stokes Mitchell, and Laura Benanti, as well as multiple Tony nominees Sherie Rene Scott and Danny Burstein, among others; music and lyrics by David Yazbek (of *Full Monty* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* fame), with Bartlett Sher as director (Sher recently directed the superb Lincoln Center revival of *South Pacific*). With such theatrical pedigree behind the show, one wonders why the musical simply does not work? Book writer Jeffrey Lane follows Almodóvar's far-fetched, complicated plot quite closely, but the frantic storyline is hardly the problem. David Yazbek's songs like "My Crazy Heart," "The Microphone" and "Tangled," are moribund and lifeless, and not one of them is remotely memorable, and that's crucial in any musical.

The story focuses on voice-over actress Pepa (Rene Scott) who is frustrated when her lover Ivan (Stokes Mitchell) leaves her and she tries desperately to contact him, but he will only communicate with her via endless answering machine messages. It would spoil the show to give any more plot details, which involve everything from terrorists to Valium-laced gazpacho soup.

Patti LuPone is an exaggerated version of the grand diva she's known to be as Ivan's ex, Lucia, who has recently been released from a mental hospital after nearly 20 years. LuPone is given little to do but sport an endless parade of outlandish outfits while speaking in a cartoonish Spanish accent, but she manages to show off her world-famous pipes in act two's solo number, "Invisible."

The show's two main standouts are Ms. Rene Scott as Pepa. Ms. Rene Scott has the biggest acting challenge here, portraying one of the neurotic women with her usual quirky effervescence. Justin Guarini (of "American Idol" fame) is especially effective as Ivan's son. The talent of the mellifluous-voiced Brian Stokes Mitchell is totally squandered on pedestrian songs like "Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Today." The many gifts of Laura Benanti, as Candela, an airheaded model and Pepa's best friend, are also underutilized with book writer Jeffrey Lane's stale dialogue and such lackluster songs as "Model Behavior."

Michael Yeargan's colorful sets, Gregory Meeh's special effects and Catherine Zuber's vibrant costumes try desperately to capture the urban, hip vibe of 1980s Madrid and all the continental, Baroque elegance of the Spanish capital during the time period, but the result is often too cloying and overwhelming to the senses. Do we *really* need to see characters gliding across the stage on moving sidewalks? While this may seem visually appealing, it comes across as garish and hollow, adding absolutely nothing to the story, and is simply an annoying distraction in a show that is already all over the place.

Overall, the main flaw with this adaptation is that it lacks all the charm and madcap comic energy of the original Almodóvar film. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the book is adapted from a Spanish-language screenplay. Audiences may be left wondering if something simply got lost in translation. Or does the European Spanish humor of a 1980s Almodóvar masterpiece just not have the key elements that make for great musical comedy? Whatever the case, it is truly a shame that so much extraordinary talent is wasted in a disappointing, ill-conceived musical version of one of the funniest foreign films of the late 20th century. This stellar cast cannot overcome a half-baked book, a tepid score, and middling direction. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, a vintage comedy about the anxiety-ridden, love-starved feminine mystique, deserved a much better stage adaptation than this.

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Broadway Listings

ORIGINAL MUSICALS



MUSICAL 'ON THE VERGE' OF COLLAPSING: (left to right) Vivian Nixon, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Nina Lafarga, & Justin Guarini in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. Photo: Paul Kolnik



WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

Patti LuPone, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Sherie Rene Scott, Laura Benanti, Danny Burstein, Justin Guarini, De'Adre Aziza, and Mary Beth Peil: what an array of names heading a cast. A dream cast if ever there was one, and who would not want to see them all together in one show? This is maybe the only instance when so many headliners in a musical may have actually hurt a show, rather than help it. When you have so many names, they all need a centerpiece, whether it is warranted or not. This comes at the expense of the production.

Based on the 1988 Pedro Almodóvar movie of the same name, set in Madrid, the story is about women and their intertwined, muddled love lives, now turned into a musical, with a meandering book by Jeffrey Lane that goes nowhere, and an unmemorable, listless score by David Yazbek. Adding to this misguided effort is Bartlett Sher's messy, busy direction. It is truly amazing that this is the same man that gave us the brilliant revival of *South Pacific* and *Light in the Piazza*, and the choreography by Christopher Gattelli is totally unnecessary and pedestrian. One has to wonder what Ms. LuPone and Mr. Mitchell saw in the script to prompt them to do this show. Unfortunately, they are the two actors whose talents are wasted the most. The rest of the cast does their best, but it is not enough. It is truly a shame that so many talented and creative people involved came up with such disappointing results.

BELASCO THEATRE, 111 West 44th Street, (212-239-6200).

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