

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## All About My Mother

Samuel Adamson, based on the film by Pedro Almodovar  
Old Vic  
(2007)

When a production is fronted by the triumvirate of Kevin Spacey, Pedro Almodovar and Dame Diana Rigg, expectations are high. Pleasingly, thanks to the involvement of this stellar trio but also a great cast and backstage team, *All About My Mother* is a real triumph for the Old Vic, which is finally beginning to put together the kind of work that was anticipated when Spacey took over as artistic director.

Almodovar's 1999 film was richly textured and densely plotted and the writer of this stage version, Samuel Adamson, has worked hard to create something equivalent. He and director Tom Cairns have had the good sense to realise that copying [Dirty Dancing](#) and doing no more than replicating the film on stage would be a dereliction of duty. A better comparison on this occasion is with Rufus Norris' and David Eldridge's [Festen](#), in which a great cinematic work is translated into an original and compelling play.

It helps to have the kind of cast that most directors dream of working with. Even many of the minor parts are taken by either big-name or talented up-and-coming actors and all work together to create fascinating evening.

It opens with Colin Morgan, recently seen starring at the Young Vic as [Vernon God Little](#), at a microphone. He plays Esteban who, unusually for a narrator, perishes in the opening few minutes but leaves his ghostly presence behind. His role is to assist his mother, Manuela beautifully depicted by Lesley Manville, in her almost Arthurian quest to rediscover his absent father.

Her journey takes us on an allegorical trip through a wild, millennial Spain, primarily focusing on the pain of motherhood in the era of AIDS; as well as sexual identity and the difficulties of living in a society where family values have almost disappeared.

The beautifully conceived set, which utilises film, is designed by Hildegard Bechtler and will be on many award shortlists. It flies in individual elements, none of which have a fit together, this symbolically demonstrating the isolation that is the lot of almost every character.

An evening that was showing promise really takes off with the arrival of Mark Gattis. The *League of Gentlemen* comic gives an hilarious performance in the part of Agrado, a self-confessed "clapped-out tranny whore" with an eccentric taste in clothing. This is supplied by costumier Moritz Junger, who may have had a few nerves on the first night at seeing the legendary Vivienne Westwood sitting a few seats from Senor Almodovar, Penelope Cruz and other stars from the movie.

The next stage of Manuela's journey sees her meeting and then becoming friend, *confidante* but ostensibly P.A. to a stage Grande Dame Huma Rojo, inevitably played by the real thing, Dame Diana.

In a play that draws heavily on literary influences, with *All About Eve* and *Blood Wedding* making major appearances as well, she is first seen playing Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The parallels between what is arguably Tennessee Williams's defining play and the lives of all involved in the Spanish drama are all too easy to see, as one tragic birthday party is replicated by another.

Collapsing relationships also feature heavily on this occasion; Huma struggling to hold together her lesbian affair with the heavily tattooed junkie Nina, brought magnificently to petulant life by Charlotte Randle.

By now, Manuela has also made another step towards fulfilling her destiny by meeting *Coronation Street*'s Joanne Froggatt in the Penelope Cruz role of Sister Rosa, a sweetly innocent nun who surely could only have been created by Almodovar, since she ends up pregnant and HIV-positive following a liaison with a transsexual prostitute.

All of this comes together in a moving finale in which Manuela gets to her man in the nick of time and is then given a second chance at motherhood, conveniently financed by the nun's wealthy mother played by Eleanor Bron.

Tom Cairns offers us a perfectly crafted non-naturalistic production that achieves moments of real tension but is also very moving. It catches more than a flavour of the original but has its own distinctive character, combining tenderness with humour and painful insight. The cast and design team all play their part. The music helps too, drawn from Alberto Iglesias' film score.

*All About My Mother* should prove a popular success thanks to the quality of the production, a truly intriguing plot and a well-known movie, which these days, is almost always a guarantee of a good box office.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)