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Author(s)	Kevin Thomas
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'The Convent' a sly, beguiling tale

Film has elegant and contemplative quality that works

By Kevin Thomas
LOS ANGELES TIMES

Manoel de Oliveira's "The Convent" is a sly, beautiful enigma of a movie, a reflection upon the eternal mystery of life itself. It's a film full of portents, cryptic asides, insinuations and warnings, all of which may mean something — or nothing at all.

In any event, it is the first international venture by the often outrageous, ever-idiosyncratic 87-year-old Portuguese maestro who began his career in the silent era and, as a matinee idol, starred in Portugal's first talkie in 1933. There is an elegant, contemplative quality to the film that is the mark of a filmmaker of long and distinguished experience. Ironically, "The Convent" is almost certainly the first Oliveira film to receive a U.S. release, his previous work showing up only at festivals.

A Paris-based scholar (John Malkovich) and his beautiful French wife (Catherine Deneuve) arrive at the ancient convent of Arrabida in Portugal, where he hopes to find in its library documents that will prove that Shakespeare was in fact a Spanish Jew named Jacques Perez, who fled Spain for Portugal during the Inquisition, settling finally in Florence.

Outlandish thesis

What actor could state this outlandish thesis with a straight face better than Malkovich? Or so convincingly suggest that he really believes his research to be more important than, of all women, Deneuve? As for her somewhat bored wife, she feels a connection with the place. Could she come to embody some ancient goddess? Who better than Deneuve for that?

The couple is greeted by the convent's guardian (Luis Miguel Cintra), a man of reptilian charm who resembles Bela Lugosi in appearance and demeanor. He goes on about the monks who lived in a starkly primitive style in nearby



Catherine Deneuve plays Helene and John Malkovich is Michael in Manoel de Oliveira's "The Convent."

REVIEW

- "The Convent"
- Starring Catherine Deneuve and John Malkovich
- Directed by Manoel de Oliveira
- At the Opera Plaza in San Francisco
- Unrated
- ★★★ (Graceful fable)

caves and about a chapel dedicated to the worship of Lucifer. In residence there's an elderly professor (Duarte D'Almeida) who takes a rather skeptical view of the convent's legends, yet spends much time with the housekeeper (Heloisa Miranda), a Tarot card devotee.

There's considerable philosophical debating between the scholar and the guardian, with the second constantly referring to Faust. Indeed, the exquisite young woman (Leonor Silveira) who is to be the scholar's research assistant could

easily stand for Goethe's Marguerite. Or maybe the visitors have simply stumbled upon a bunch of satanists or a coven of witches.

Amusing quality

"The Convent" is suffused with an amusing quality of tentativeness, which Oliveira sustains with the ease of a veteran tightrope walker. Essential to the unsettling mood he creates is the dramatic, edgy score composed by Sofia Gubaidulina and incorporating portions of Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" and

Toshiro Mayuzumi's "Prelude for a String Quartet."

For all its intimations of evil and even danger, this most graceful of fables can in the end be taken as a simple tale of a couple who needed to get away for a while, to a place that's actually lots more charming than sinister, so as to get their marriage back on track.

The elliptical style and complex themes make the film a tough go for youngsters but there is nothing in the film that is inappropriate for them.