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'O,' a comedy about passion

By Jeanne Miller

Eric Rohmer's "The Marquise of O...," Saturday night's West German-French co-production at the Film Festival, is a delightful comedy of manners, based on Heinrich von Kleist's novella published in 1808.

While the period piece seems at first a departure for Rohmer from the philosophical, interior nature of his contemporary six moral tales ("My Night at Maud's," "Claire's Knee," "Chloe in the Afternoon," etc.), the French director is here also concerned with characters whose moral principles are constantly at war with their natural passions.

Set in the late 18th century, the film begins when a fortress in a northern Italian town is besieged by the Russians. The Marquise of O (Edith Clever), a beautiful and virtuous widow, who lives there with her two children, her mother and her father, the fort's commandant, is saved from a brutal rape by a gallant Czarist officer (Bruno Ganz).

The next day, the dashing count leaves the grateful family and they are dismayed some time later to learn that he has been killed in battle. But he recovers from his wounds, returns to the fort and asks the Marquise to marry him to bring him "peace of mind."

When her father points out to him that she has vowed never to remarry and that she barely knows him, the count returns to his regiment, determined to press his suit when he returns.

Meanwhile, the Marquise discovers she is pregnant, and her parents, not believing her protestations of innocence, drive her from their home to the shelter of her country estate.

Ostracized and reduced to despair, she takes out an ad in the local newspaper asking the unknown man responsible for her pregnancy to come to her home so that they may be married.

Rohmer sustains rich nuances of humor and compassion by never mocking the feelings of his characters. He treats their absurd plight in the same deadly serious vein that they themselves view it. Therefore, the comedy is gentle and warm and never becomes abrasive or patronizing.



Edith Clever plays a beautiful, virtuous widow who can't explain her pregnancy in "The Marquise of O..."

The actors, most of them from the German theater, are highly skilled, especially Miss Clever, whose moments of comic pathos are charming and persuasive. Ganz is equally effective and deft comedic portrayals are also contributed by Edda Seippel as the scatter-brained mother and Otto Sander as the stern father.

Rohmer's camera exquisitely captures the look of the period with the same sure eye that he uses to evoke the mores of the time and their impact on those who lived by them.