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THE LETTER

(A CARTA/LA LETTRE)

(ROMANTIC DRAMA —
PORTUGUESE-FRENCH-SPANISH)

A Madragia Filmes (Lisbon)/Gemini Films (Paris)/Wanda Filmes (Madrid) production. (International sales: Gemini Films, Paris.) Produced by Paulo Branco.

Directed, written by Manoel de Oliveira, based on the book "The Princess of Cleves" by Mme de la Fayette. Camera (color), Emmanuel Machuel; editor, Valerie Loiseleux; production designer, Ana Vaz Da Silva; costume designer, Judy Shrewsbury; sound (Dolby), Jean Paul Mugel; literary consultant, Jacques Parsi; assistant director, Ze Maria Vaz Da Silva. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 20, 1999. Running time: 108 MIN.**

Mme de Cleves Chiara Mastroianni
Pedro Abrunhosa Pedro Abrunhosa
M. de Cleves Antoine Chappey
The Nun Leonor Silveira
Mme de Chartres Francoise Fabian
Maria Joao Pires Maria Joao Pires
Mme de Silva Anny Romand
Francois de Guise Stanislas Merhar
(French and Portuguese dialogue)

By DAVID STRATTON

The Cannes Film Festival wouldn't be the same without a film from veteran Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira. At the age of 90, he's back this year with "The Letter," a contemplative, deceptively simple updating of a 17th century French novel. Despite the considerable presence of rock singer Pedro Abrunhosa, who performs several numbers and plays the role of an ardent but unrequited lover, the sentiments in this stately film are entirely those of another era, and younger Euro audiences may find it all a bit quaint. But older arthouse viewers may succumb to the director's old-fashioned values, both thematically and cinematically. Modest Euro theatrical results and plenty of fest exposure are to be anticipated.

Mme de la Fayette's "The Princess of Cleves" is a seminal work of French literature (and has been filmed previously, in period). Oliveira has adapted the story, of a proper young wife who finds herself loved by another man, to present-day Paris. (Portuguese-majority co-production is set entirely in France, and the vast bulk of the dialogue is French.)

When first seen, Mme de Cleves (Chiara Mastroianni) is not yet married, and the ardent young Francois de Guise (Stanislas Merhar) still has hopes she'll marry him. But the virginal young woman instead settles on a

middle-aged doctor, Jacques de Cleves (Antoine Chappey), to whom she is introduced during a piano recital.

When Abrunhosa, a popular Portuguese rocker, performs for a tony audience, there's significant eye contact between the singer and the young wife. Mme de Cleves is troubled as a result, as is her mother (Francoise Fabian), who, before she dies, warns her daughter not to risk an affair. When Abrunhosa visits the family home to express his condolences, Mme de Cleves observes him stealing a small framed photograph of herself.

She confides in her lifelong friend, a nun (Leonor Silveira), who assures her that she can govern her actions but not her heart. So Mme de Cleves stays at arm's length from the attractive Abrunhosa. Many viewers will become exasperated with the heroine and wonder why she doesn't have a raging affair with Abrunhosa. But the film remains securely locked into 17th century sensibilities; and despite all the modern trappings the film is in most ways defiantly old-fashioned.

Oliveira dispenses with great chunks of the narrative by the simple method of inserting expository titles, which cover such key moments of the story as the heroine's decision to marry de Cleves and her eventual destiny. He also stops the film dead to allow an entire Schubert piano piece to be played; same goes for the three or four numbers performed by Abrunhosa. Stylistically, the elegantly restrained pic shares with the last films of Luis Bunuel a serene stillness. Oliveira makes the filmmaking process seem effortless, with quietly attractive results.

It's a credit to the actors that they manage to make their characters just about believable; Mastroianni is particularly effective as the proper heroine. Abrunhosa, never seen without his dark glasses, is a brooding presence as the would-be lover. Technical credits are all up to the highest standard.