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A Carta

La Lettre**Manoel de Oliveira****PORTUGAL/FRANCE/SPAIN, 1999**

107 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: **Madragoa Filmes/ Gemini Films/Wanda Films**Producer: **Paulo Branco**Screenplay: **Manoel de Oliveira, based on the novel "La Princesse de Clèves" by Madame de La Fayette**Cinematographer: **Emmanuel Machuel**Editor: **Valérie Loiseleux**Production Designer: **Ana Vaz da Silva**Sound: **Jean Paul Mugel**Principal Cast: **Chiara Mastroianni, Pedro Abrunhosa, Antoine Chappey, Leonor Silveira**Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent: **Gemini Films, 73 rue Saint Denis, 75001 Paris, France. T (33-1) 4039-0375 F (33-1) 4233-1213 E gemini@easynet.fr**Production: **Madragoa Filmes, Av. Don Manuel 1, n° 3, 2890 Alcochete, Portugal. T (351-1) 234-2185 F (351-1) 234-2202**

La Lettre is loosely based on Madame de La Fayette's 17th-century novel, "La Princesse de Clèves." Manoel de Oliveira, the ageless Portuguese master, has transposed the book's setting to present-day Paris but has remained remarkably faithful to the essence of the original work. The formality of the conversational exchanges, the reticence of emotions expressed and passions withheld, the spiritual solace that the heroine seeks by confiding in a nun are all tinged with the conventions of the 17th century, and yet this is a completely modern film. Constantly moving between past and present sensibilities, de Oliveira explores notions of love, passion and marital commitment against the touchstone of older mores. And he does this brilliantly.

The narrative is quite straightforward. The young and beautiful Mme de Clèves is being courted by the ardent François de Guise, who is inappropriate for her. Instead she settles for the well-known, middle-aged doctor, Jacques de Clèves, for whom she feels no passion – it is a marriage of convenience. However, shortly after her marriage she meets Abrunhosa, a popular singer, and her latent feelings of love and passion rise to the surface. Her mother warns against an affair. Mme de Clèves visits a friend, now a nun in a convent, for advice. What ensues provides both the emotional and narrative core of *La Lettre*.

De Oliveira is producing work of an increasingly pure and simplified nature.

La Lettre is unquestionably one of his supreme achievements. It is directed with unostentatious rigour; not a shot is out of place or lasts too long. Admirably supported by a superb cast, the film is, however, much more than a mere technical achievement. It probes the nature of love, passion and commitment in the most timeless of fashions by daring to be different.

■ **Piers Handling**

Manoel de Oliveira was born in Porto, Portugal in 1908. After making his first feature in 1942, he directed nothing but documentaries and short films for the next 30 years. During the seventies, he became recognized by critics as one of Europe's most important directors. Selected filmography: *Aniki-Bobó* (42), *The Past and the Present* (71), *The Virgin Mother* (75), *Hopeless Love* (78), *Francisca* (81), *The Satin Slipper* (85), *My Case* (86), *The Cannibals* (88), *The Divine Comedy* (91), *The Day of Despair* (92), *Abraham's Valley* (93), *Blind Man's Bluff* (94), *The Convent* (95), *Party* (96), *Journey to the Beginning of the World* (97), *Inquiétude* (98) and *La Lettre* (99).

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