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ANTIGUA, MY LIFE

(ANTIGUA, VIDA MIA)

(ARGENTINA-SPAIN)

An AltaFilms release (in Spain) of a Aries Cinematografica Argentina (Argentina)/Tornasol Films, Enrique Cerezo Producciones (Spain) production, in association with TVE, Via Digital. (International sales: KWA, Madrid.) Produced by Luis Osvaldo Repetto, Luis Alberto Scaella, Gerardo Herrero, Enrique Cerezo.

Directed by Hector Olivera. Screenplay, Angeles Gonzalez-Sinde, Alberto Macias, based on the novel by Marcela Serrano. Camera (color), Alfredo Mayo; editor, Miguel Perez; music, Angel Illarramendi; art director, Santiago Elder; sound (Dolby Digital), Jorge Stavropulos. Reviewed at Cine Princesa, Madrid, Feb. 6, 2002. Running time: 110 MIN.

With: Ana Belen, Cecilia Roth, Juan Leyrado, Jorge Marrale.

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

A femme drama that's a finely tuned exploration of universal themes, Argentine vet Hector Olivera's "Antigua, My Life" is full of worthy intentions but is overly didactic and preachy. Themes like the doomed quest for happiness among the spiritually arid middle classes, the rights and responsibilities of women in contempo Argentine society and marital violence are all dealt with sensitively. But the whole project has a detached, schematic feel that reduces emotional involvement. In Spain, B.O. has been mild; offshore, the unglamorous pic is unlikely to generate much business.

Violeta Dasinski (Cecilia Roth) is arrested for murdering writer husband Eduardo (Juan Leyrado). Pic then retraces the events that led to the crime. The 40-ish Violeta was initially excited about having found Mr. Right, but slimy Eduardo quickly turned out to be Mr. Wrong: Dismissive of her wishes to have a child, he's a boozy tyrant who ends up raping her.

Violeta's friend, Josefa Ferrer (Ana Belen, returning to film work after a five-year absence), is a high-strung singer who's also locked into an unhappy marriage, with Andres (Jorge Marrale). She looks on aghast at Violeta's problems.

Violeta is also obsessed by the mother she never met, a freedom fighter who is buried in Antigua and whose past Violeta wants to uncover.

The physically powerful Leyrado brings Eduardo's masculine confusions plausibly to life, and, as Violeta, the reliable Roth convincingly portrays the way one's hopes can block out unpleasant realities. However, Belen struggles to make the role of the superficial Josefa interesting in its own right, her egotism sitting uneasily next to her professed caring for Violeta.

The light-hearted score is sometimes at odds with the intensity of the drama. At one point Belen even gets to stand up and sing a song — which feels like an interruption.

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