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VALE ABRAO

VALLEY OF ABRAHAM)

(PORTUGUESE-FRENCH-SWISS)

Variety, June 7, 1993

A Madragoa Filmes (Portugal)/Gemini Films (France)/Light Night Production (Switzerland) co-production, in association with IPC/FC Gulbenkian/SEC/CNC/Canal Plus/Office Federal de la Culture (Berne)/TSR/Eurimages. Produced by Paulo Branco. Directed, written by Manoel de Oliveira, from Agustina Bessa-Luis' novel. Camera, Mario Barroso; editor, de Oliveira, Valerie Loiseleux; art direction, Maria Jose Branco; costumes, Isabel Branco; sound, Henri Maikoff. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight), May 20, 1993. Running time: 187 MIN.

Ema Leonor Silveira
Young Ema Cecile Sanz De Alba
Carlo De Paiva Luis Miguel Cintra
Paulino Cardeano Rui De Carvalho
Pedro Lumiares Luis Lima Barreto
Simona Micheline Larpin
Fernando Osorio Diogo Doria

Also with: Jose Pinto, Filipe Cochofel, Joao Perry, Gloria De Matos, Antonio Reis, Isabel Ruth.

“Valley of Abraham,” the most accessible of Manoel de Oliveira’s work to date, will win new fans for Portugal’s difficult art film director. Though over three hours long, pic’s strong storyline makes it as engrossing as a rich 19th century novel. Pic should make headway into larger arthouse markets while it tours festivals.

Certainly one of the richest, most cultured directors alive, de Oliveira begins “Valley” with a Biblical citation linking its breathtaking northern Portuguese locations with Abraham’s exploitation of his wife Sarah’s body. The expectation that this is a film about female victimization is strengthened when the young heroine, Ema (Cecile Sanz De Alba), begins wistfully reading “Madame Bovary.” As a woman (Leonor Silveira), she even marries a passive doctor (Luis Miguel Cintra) she doesn’t love, and begins to have affairs.

But de Oliveira (who, at 85, has hit his stride) throws viewers a curve ball full of mischievous irony. Film is adapted from Agustina Bessa-Luis’ novel, itself a reflection on Flaubert. “Abraham” deliberately confuses the Bovary comparison, forcing viewers to keep rethinking literary and cultural givens.

During a privileged childhood with her doting father, Ema discovers she has enormous power over men. She causes car crashes just by standing by a country road, and has many suitors. But her hold over men isn’t enough to satisfy her, and pic ends with Ema’s carefully prepared death.

The film’s great device is an off-screen narration, constantly commenting on the images and giving them a different slant. The idea that Ema is a dazzling, menacing beauty — underlined by the narrator — is something else from Silveira’s quiet, slightly awkward charm. Perfs reflect the narration’s arch irony. De Oliveira regulars Silveira and Cintra are perfectly in step with this distanced acting, so deadpan it gets a laugh.

The narrator keeps busy advancing the plot and interjecting heavy bouts of psychological and social analyses. Auds are forced to read enough subtitles to fill a small 19th-century novel, but happily, the effect is more stimulating than soporific.

Uniformly stunning locations in the Portuguese countryside are rendered expressive by Mario Barroso’s silken cinematography. Costumes and decor give pic a magical atemporal quality that makes it a shock every time a car drives by. — *Deborah Young*