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A TALKING PICTURE

(UM FILME FALADO)

(PORTUGAL-FRANCE-ITALY)

A Madragoa Filmes/Gemini Films/Mikado Film/France 2 Cinema co-production. (International sales: Gemini Films, Paris.) Produced by Paulo Branco.

Directed, written by Manoel de Oliveira. Camera (color), Emmanuel Machuel; editor, Valerie Loiseleux; production designer, Ze Branco; costume designer, Isabel Branco; sound (Dolby Digital), Philippe Morel. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing)**, Aug. 30, 2003. Running time: **96 MIN.**

(Portuguese, English, French, Greek dialogue)

Rosa Maria Leonor Silveira

Maria Joana Filipa de Almeida

Captain John Malkovich

Helena Irene Papas

Delphine Catherine Deneuve

Francesca Stefania Sandrelli

Actor Luis Miguel Cintra

By DEBORAH YOUNG

A film destined to divide Manoel de Oliveira's fans but also to win him new ones, "A Talking Picture" is his simplest, most linear story in memory. A history prof takes her daughter on a cruise around the Mediterranean, admiring its monuments to civilization — but culture is a fragile thing in a barbarous world. Ennui sets in midway through the voyage, broken by a surprise ending with little of the ambiguity the director is prized for; nevertheless, with stars like Oliveira vets John Malkovich, Irene Papas and Catherine Deneuve aboard, this literate but accessible parable should tempt some new travelers to voyage with the director.

The warning implicit in film's title is redundant, given the unchecked flow of dialogue in most of the director's work. In fact, here images steal the scene, at least in film's first half. Rosa Maria (Leonor Silveira) and her 8-year-old daughter Maria Joana (Filipa de Almeida) embark on a cruise ship in Lisbon. They plan to get off in Bombay, where Rosa Maria's husband, an airline pilot, will join them on vacation.

At every port of call — Marseilles, Naples, Athens, Istanbul, Cairo — Rosa Maria patiently describes to her daughter the history and myths surrounding the great Mediterranean civilizations. From Pompeii and Vesuvius to the Acropolis, Hagia Sophia to the pyramids, these two charming tourists talk culture in the most graceful way, exchanging views with local guides and, at one point, with Oliveira regular Luis Miguel Cintra (playing himself).

After quite a number of these excursions, the scene shifts to the ship's dining room for the lengthy final scenes.

In a repeated gag, famous faces have boarded the ship in various ports: Catherine Deneuve in Marseilles, Stefania Sandrelli in Naples and Irene Papas in Athens. Now they come together at captain John Malkovich's table for some dinner conversation.

In another successful gag, each speaks in his or her native tongue — English, French, Italian and Greek — and they understand each other perfectly. (Thanks to subtitles, so does the audience.) Malkovich, who seems to be awkwardly improvising throughout, notes how nice it is to speak foreign languages, the root of civilization.

Their stilted, pompous conversation, which drones on, lacks both the wit and irony of Oliveira's trademark literary dialogue. It's a relief when the clear-headed Rosa Maria and bright Maria Joana are invited to join them.

But culture offers no shield against a sudden threat that looms when the captain is called away from the table, and the tale ends on a very bleak note.

Oliveira's muse Silveira shows divine calm, clarity and self-confidence delivering history lessons to young de Almeida, a model student who doesn't mind asking what a pharaoh or an Arab is. Deneuve, who plays a rich businesswoman, is surprisingly under-used, while Sandrelli, cast as a tearful former model, works very poorly as an Oliveira character. Of the three graces, Papas comes off best and, playing a famous singer, beautifully performs a long Greek folksong.

Emmanuel Machuel's lensing is simple and unfussy, privileging aude with shots of monuments like the Sphinx, while keeping to the bare essentials aboard ship. A prow cutting through the ocean suggests all the movement the film needs.

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