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MOVIE REVIEW

The Passenger

An Odyssey in a New Identity

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At once a suspenseful adventure, a parable on the inescapability of responsibility and a tender love story, Michelangelo Antonioni's long-awaited "The Passenger," starring Jack Nicholson and Maria Schneider, is a masterpiece of visual beauty and rigorous artistry that is as tantalizing as it is hypnotic.

It is a major achievement by one of the world's great film-makers and boasts still another of those splendid portrayals from Nicholson, up for an Oscar tonight for "Chinatown," that are establishing him as the foremost American screen actor of his generation.

Nicholson plays a well-known journalist attempting to get some film on an elusive guerrilla war in an African dictatorship. Overcome by despair in the midst of a desert waste, he succumbs to an impulse to assume the identity of a fellow guest (Chuck Mulvehill) of somewhat similar appearance who has died in their Godforsaken hotel. The sense of futility that Nicholson experiences in trying to relate truly to the guerrillas has extended over the rest of his existence.

In exchanging personal possessions with those of the dead man, Nicholson comes across a date book and decides, out of curiosity and aimlessness, to take off for Munich, after a stopover in London, to keep the first of a series of appointments. To his astonishment the dead man, whom Nicholson only knew to have been a businessman without family or friends, turns out to have been supplying the guerrillas with weapons.

From his contacts in Munich, a German and a black man, he receives the first installment, a hefty sum, in a series of payments for the next shipment. To his embarrassment Nicholson ironically is praised by the black man for his understanding and heroism—but he accepts the money anyway and decides to go to Barcelona for more.

Thus begins Nicholson's odyssey in his new identity, an odyssey that will take him all over Spain. Soon on his trail, however, is a TV producer (Ian Hendry) eager to interview the man who could shed some light on the "dead" journalist's final moments. Then Nicholson's wife (Jenny Runacre) soon realizes that her husband is alive and in great danger from agents of that African dictatorship. Also there are those members of the guerrilla underground expecting Nicholson to deliver the goods . . .

This may sound like the outline of a TV movie plot, but mere words, if anything, threaten to diminish Antonioni's breathtaking imagery, his superb structuring, his exquisite sense of composition. That notion of the inescapability of responsibility is but a philosophical point of departure for Antonioni to explore the enigma of personality and finally of life itself, revealing in the process the director's characteristic preoccupations with spiritual inertia and, perhaps more pronouncedly than ever, a wish for death.

"The Passenger" is the perfect example of a film that never falls back on dialogue to communicate that which a

Please Turn to Page 18, Col. 1

'PASSENGER'

Continued from First Page

camera might do more profoundly—and infinitely more challengingly. When such artistic discipline is combined with a genius for expressiveness, the impact can be emotionally overwhelming for those willing to submit to Antonioni's demand for absolute concentration. The film's already discussed and much-touted final seven minutes, consisting of one long, stupefying take, is sure to become one of the cinema's sacred moments.

Everything in "The Passenger" is up there on the screen. Antonioni never cheats. He shows (but never explains) everything that will compel us to want to make connections for ourselves. An exceedingly daring film-maker, he will hold a shot just one beat short of the onslaught of boredom to allow us to experience fully the mood and atmosphere in which his people breathe.

That "The Passenger" is the auteur film supreme heightens rather than lessens the contributions of the director's colleagues. The spare, sinewy script, based on a story by young Britisher Mark Peploe, who collaborated in its adaptation with Antonioni, and film theorist Peter Wollen, serves Antonioni's personality as ideally as Luciano Tovoli's consummately eloquent camerawork.

Just after the release of "Easy Rider," Jack Nicholson told an interviewer that he saw himself as a "useful" actor, and that quality is particularly evident here. One suspects that this film was a much tougher assignment than either "The Last Detail" or "Chinatown" (which actually followed it), for here Nicholson is playing one of Antonioni's notoriously passive males. But since his capacity for expressiveness and concern for the revealing detail matches that of his director, he is able to evoke enormous—and absolutely essential—sympathy for this lost, drifting man.

He is well-paired with the piquant Maria Schneider, cast as a self-possessed young woman whom he meets in Barcelona and who has the very capacity for commitment and caring that the journalist feels he has lost. Miss Ruanacre, so memorable as that tall, awkward girl humiliated by John Cassavetes in "Husbands," is exactly right as Nicholson's wife, ridden with guilt that her accusations of too much detachment in his work have contributed to causing him to try to run away from himself.

Filmed in England, Spain, Germany and Algeria, "The Passenger" (at the Regent, Westwood,) is at the very least a sumptuous and enticing travelogue. At its very considerable most it seems sure to become one of the key films of the '70s.