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# THE CONVENT

(O CONVENTO)

(PORTUGUESE-FRENCH)

A Madragoa Filmes (Lisbon)/Gemini Films (Paris)/La Sept-Cinema (Paris) co-production, in association with IPACA Instituto Portugues da Arte Cinematografica e Audiovisual, Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, Canal Plus. (International sales: UGC da International.) Producer, Paulo Branco.

Directed, written by Manoel de Oliveira, based on an idea by Agustina Bessa-Luis. Camera (Kodak color), Mario Barroso; editors, Oliveira, Valerie Loiseleux; production design, Ze Branco, Ana Vaz da Silva; costumes, Isabel Branco; production manager, Joao Canijo; sound, Jean-Paul Mugel. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 24, 1995. Running time: 90 MIN.

(English, French and Portuguese dialogue)

Helene Padovic ..... Catherine Deneuve  
Michael Padovic ..... John Malkovich  
Baltar ..... Luis Miguel Cintra  
Piedade ..... Leonor Silveira  
Baltazar ..... Duarte D'Almeida  
Berta ..... Heloisa Miranda  
Fisherman ..... Gilberto Goncalves

**B**oasting two international stars and a normal running time, "The Convent" may be the most accessible film yet by Portugal's dean of filmmakers, Manoel de Oliveira. Accessibility, however, is a relative concept, especially when applied to a director as idiosyncratic and unapologetically erudite as Oliveira. Shot for \$5.5 million, the film has been

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VARIETY



**EURO ERUDITION:** Catherine Deneuve and John Malkovich star in Manoel de Oliveira's "The Convent," set in a Portuguese monastery.

pre-sold throughout Europe except to Germany, and could mark the 87-year-old director's crossover to a broader section of art-house auds. But the pic will need careful niche marketing to prepare viewers for an exercise in cerebral fun, not a standard arty star turn.

Indeed, a cast headlining Catherine Deneuve and John Malkovich may mislead some viewers into expecting a conventionally dramatic film, which "Convent" assuredly is not. The story of an eccentric American prof who comes to a spooky Portuguese monastery with his wife to prove that Shakespeare was really a Jewish Spaniard sounds like the plot of a student horror film. In reality, it's only a pretext for an Oliveirian reflection on the relative power of thought and desire, good and evil.

As the curtain rises on the medieval convent of Arrabida, mousy prof Michael Padovic (Malkovich) and his dazzling wife, Helene (Deneuve), stumble onto an atmosphere of sinister foreboding. They are courteously put up by the monastery's guardian, Baltar (Miguel Luis Cintra), a suave but eerie host who is irresistibly drawn to the aloof Helene. To clear the field, he encourages Michael to bury himself in a dusty library and gives him the convent's beautiful young archivist, Piedade (Leonor Silveira), as an assistant.

The characters proceed to act out the Faust story, as Baltar tempts Michael to pursue immortality through his writing and research.

The presence of Deneuve — who set the production in motion a year ago with her desire to work with Oliveira — in a world of mutilated saints and bleeding Christs recalls her youthful work with Luis Bunuel. But as a movie icon, Deneuve can't help but overpower Oliveira's universe. Malkovich disappears into the film's woodwork better. As a simple seeker of truth, he pairs nicely with the clarion goodness of Silveira as Piedade, and makes a good foil for Cintra's Baltar-cum-Mephistopheles. What a woman like Helene sees in him remains one of the pic's mysteries.

By rigorously avoiding camera movement and closeups, Oliveira achieves a stately grandeur out of time. Mario Barroso's lensing concentrates on somber tones and overcast skies. Camera angles and tricks recall Oliveira's fondness for Expressionist cinema. This is high Oliveira country, where patience, thought and an offbeat sense of humor are amply repaid.

—Deborah Young