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MOVIE REVIEW

A voyage of discovery with worldly women

Sophisticated characters hold viewers entranced in Manoel de Oliveira's 'A Talking Picture.'

By KEVIN THOMAS
Times Staff Writer

"A Talking Picture" is an honest title for a film that is almost entirely conversation. Yet its rich contemplative tone proves deceptive, for its director, Portugal's preeminent filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira, at 96, still knows how to pack a wallop. Oliveira establishes a sense of timelessness only to catch his audience up short with a film that ultimately could scarcely be a more timely comment on the world in which we live. "A Talking Picture" is a beautiful film, and along with John Malkovich, an Oliveira favorite, at his most urbane, it features to fine advantage three of the international cinema's most elegant and enduring actresses. Catherine Deneuve (another Oliveira favorite), Irene Papas and Stefania Sandrelli.

Distinguished Lisbon history professor Rosa Maria (Leonor Silveira) and her exquisite 7-year-old daughter, Maria Joana (Filipa de Almeida), embark upon a cruise that will take them to Bombay, where Rosa Maria's airline pilot husband will meet them for a vacation in India. Rosa Maria is exhilarated at the prospect of getting to see firsthand so many of the places where so much of what she teaches took place. Fortunately for her, Maria Joana is an endlessly curious little girl who never tires of her mother's stories. From Portugal they proceed to Marseilles and on to Naples, where they stop over to visit Pompeii, on to Ceuta in Spanish Morocco and then Athens to take in the Parthenon and other sites. From there they proceed to Egypt and Istanbul.

Along the way, Deneuve's Delfina, an international entrepreneur; Papas' Helena, a celebrated Greek actress and singer; and Sandrelli, an Italian former fashion model, join the cruise.

They are all international celebrities, frequently appearing in magazines and on television, and are asked by Malkovich, as the ship's captain, to join his table for evening meals. All the women for the most part speak in their native language, and all four are sufficient linguists to understand each other easily with a comprehension that clearly goes beyond words. Delfina and Helena are strong, independent women, while Sandrelli's Francesca, mourning the loss of her beloved husband, has taken to traveling frequently for its "nostalgic solitude" and the chance to make new friends.

These are four worldly individuals, each with a different background but equally sophisticated. Their conversation is the epitome of wit and sophistication, and Helena, as a proud Greek, has an appreciation of history and civilization as deep as that of Rosa Maria, who along with her daughter is invited by the captain to join their group. These individuals could not be more charming, and they know how to live the good life. Just at the moment when that life couldn't seem much better, as Helena sings a plaintive song, "A Talking Picture" abruptly veers in a wholly unexpected direction, casting an ironic light on all that has gone before and emerging as a total stunner with implications that linger in the mind and heart long after the theater lights have gone up.

'A Talking Picture'

MPAA rating: Unrated

Times guidelines: Mature themes

Leonor Silveira	Rosa Maria
John Malkovich	Capt. John Walesa
Catherine Deneuve	Delfina
Stefania Sandrelli	Francesca
Irene Papas	Helena
Filipa de Almeida	Maria Joana

A Kino International release of a co-production of Madragoa Filmes (Portugal)/Gemini Films (France)/Mikado (Italy) and RIP-Radiotelevisao Portuguesa (Portugal). Writer-director Manoel de Oliveira. Producer Paulo Branco. Cinematographer Emmanuel Machuel. Costumes Isabel Branco. In English, Portuguese, French, Greek and Italian, with English subtitles.

Exclusively at the Fairfax Cinemas, 7907 Beverly Blvd. (at Fairfax Avenue), (323) 655-4010.