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de Oliveira's feet, will try some
auds' patience, but the affecting
muted rawness and standout
perfs are too beautifully modu-
lated to keep in festival lock-up.

Stage actor Mario (Nuno Lopes)
has developed a daily ritual in his
search for his missing 4-year-old
daughter Alice. He rises early and
passes out missing-poster leaflets
to Lisbon's incoming commuters.
And, just as he did on the morning
of her disappearance nearly 200
days earlier, he brings the same
suit to the dry cleaners each day
and walks to the nursery Alice at-
tended.

He then proceeds to collect the
videotapes from the 11 surveil-
lance cameras he's posted in loca-
tions throughout the city. Set up in
friends' apartments and rooftops,
shops and the airport, these cam-
eras are positioned in strategic lo-
cales in the hope they will one day
catch a glimpse of Mario's daugh-
ter.

In the evening, Mario performs
in a play, and, at night, he watches
the tapes, displayed on a bank of
video monitors, scanning the fast-
forwarded images for any child re-
sembling Alice.

Mario's wife, Luisa (Beatriz
Batarda), hasn't developed a rou-
tine like his. At pic's start she's a
barely glimpsed presence in the
darkened bedroom, but about
halfway through helmer Martins
seamlessly jumps back to the night
of Alice's disappearance, when
Luisa's shock turns to an under-
standable hysteria.

As in Nanni Moretti's "The Son's
Room," Martins is interested in
how people cope with a tragedy too
profound to process, but he's work-
ing on a much more intimate, at
times claustrophobic scale. There
are other characters in "Alice,"
people who try to help, but Mario is
a kind of semiblinded wanderer.

Lopes manages to combine a
sense of intense focus with com-
plete exhaustion. His Mario is
never less than heart wrenching as
he passes through each stage of his
obsession. Always the pic's focus,
Lopes makes palpable the struc-
tured, controlled despair, so
painfully contrasted with Batarda's
fine rendering of Luisa's dark hys-
teria.

Together with d.p. Carlos Lopes,
helmer Martins steeps his film in
sunless images that contribute to a
feeling of days and nights running
together, each one a repetition of
the next. Early scenes are lensed
with almost exclusively tight
shots, never revealing as much as
the eye desires.

With beautiful understatement,
Roberto Perpignani's music
lingers in conjunction with pic's
general mood of quiet desolation.

ALICE

(PORTUGAL)

A Clap Filmes production, with the par-
ticipation of the Ministerio da cultura, In-
stituto de cinema, Audiovisual e Multime-
dia RTP. (International sales: Gemini
Films, Paris.) Produced by Paulo Branco.

Directed, written by Marco Martins.
Camera (color), Carlos Lopes; editors, Joao
Braz, Roberto Perpignani; music, Bernardo
Sasseti; art designer, Artur Pinheiro; cos-
tume designer, Luisa Pinto; sound (Dolby
SRD), Pedro Melo; sound editor, Elsa Fer-
reira; assistant directors, Pedro Madeira,
Dorte Schneider; casting, Patricia Vascon-
celos. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival
(Directors Fortnight), May 16, 2005. Run-
ning time: 104 MIN.

With: Nuno Lopes, Beatriz Batarda,
Miguel Guilherme, Ana Bustorff, Laura
Soveral, Goncalo Waddington, Carla Ma-
ciel, Jose Wallenstein, Clara Andermatt,
Ivo Canelas, Teresa Faria, Carlos Santos.

By JAY WEISSBERG

A powerful study of intense
grief that reps a sure-
handed and insightful fea-
ture debut by ad helmer Marco
Martins, "Alice" is steeped in a
despair both profound and elo-
quent. Enveloped in a penum-
bral world of predawns and
cloud-covered days, pic follows
a father's daily search for his
missing daughter, detailing the
quietly obsessive routine he fol-
lows to maintain a grip both on
his sanity and his child's mem-
ory. Pacing, learned at Manoel