

Interview / Manoel de Oliveira

Despite an irregular career, the 87-year-old Portuguese film director, **Manoel de Oliveira**, has created a significant body of work that places him among Europe's important directors.

He caused a political scandal with his first short film 'Douro, Work By the River', in 1931, and acted in Portugal's first talkie, 'A Cancao De Lisboa', in 1933. After directing his first feature film, 'Aniki-Bobo', in 1942, he fell silent for the next two decades, following it up with 12 feature films in the last two decades, and about one each in the last five years.

Oliveira's style of film-making lends great subtlety as well as a striking visual quality to his projects. His best known films include 'Act of Spring' (1963), 'Hopeless Love' (1978), 'The Day of Despair' (1992) and 'Valley of Abraham' (1993).

Vijay Jodha spoke to the director, who was in New York to attend the screening of his latest film, **The Convent**, in which a visit to a Spanish convent by a professor (John Malkovich) researching on Shakespeare and his wife, Catherine Deneuve, becomes the starting point for probing the recesses of human relationships. Excerpts from the interview:

Is there a link between your personal religious convictions and the images of religion presented in the film 'The Convent'?

I hail from a Catholic family. I have received a Catholic education from the Jesuits and therefore, have a strong connection with that faith. However, the real feeling for religion is reserved for the great spirits among us, whereas I am a man with many doubts.

Are the characters in the film based on the biblical view of good and evil?

You can say that the film is inspired by the biblical view as a starting point, especially the scene in the New Testament where Satan takes Christ up to the mountain. You must remember that Christ, besides being god, was also fully human and could be tempted. Satan shows him the world and tells him that he could be the master of all that.

This, along with another situation were in the text that I received from the writer Augustina Bessa-Luis. And I transferred this idea to the convent in the film. The film is not inspired by the devil but by my desire to work with a very great actress — Catherine Deneuve.

The scene of Shakespeare's Sephardic background in the beginning of the film has a very tangential role in the film. Why?

The idea of Shakespeare's Sephardic background really comes from the writer, Augustina Bessa-Luis and it seems that there is some evidence that it might have been so. In the film, the character played by John Malkovich begins with this interest in Shakespeare's nationality but realises that the Bard's greatness had little to do with that notion of particularity and more to do with the humanity that he came to represent.

I also used Shakespeare because he was extremely influenced by the Bible, especially the Book of Job.

The film had remarkable images. Could you talk about the film's visual plan and how it interacts with the theme?

In terms of visuals, the atmosphere was magical. The convent in question is no longer functioning. It is now a venue for conferences. I worked very closely with the decor and with the cinematographer, to try and create this kind of ambience. But most of all, I was helped most by the actors, especially Catherine Deneuve, who had something magical about her.

Was there any special reason for choosing to work with Catherine Deneuve?

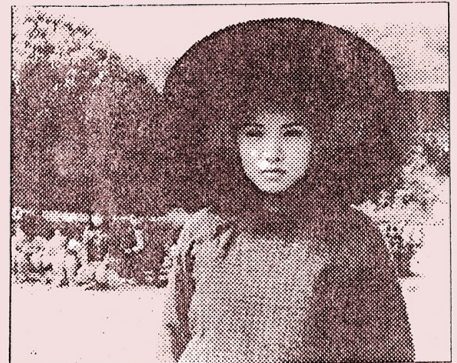
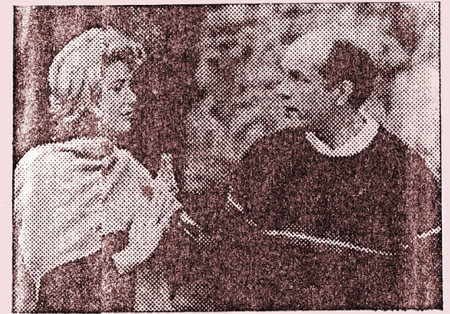
Without Catherine Deneuve *The Convent* could not have been made. I asked Luis to write the story — the original was very different — with Catherine Deneuve in mind.

In 1971, I had asked a Portuguese producer with many French contacts, to talk to Catherine about working for this film. The contact was made but unfortunately, she could not make herself available at that point.

I think in the intervening years, the devil spoke to Catherine and told her to work for me!

Towards the end of the film, the character played by Catherine emerges from water. Is there any specific myth that you were alluding to?

The way I tried to set it up was that the film ends only when the viewer really wants it to end. In a sense the viewer closes it. And by seeing it as a mythological aspect, you allow it to continue on and I think that's a good thing.



(From bottom) Neill's 'Cinema of Unease', Hou Hsiao-Hsien's 'Good Men, Good Women' and 'The Convent'