

MYSTERIES OF LISBON

Raul Ruíz died last month at the age of 70, leaving *La Noche de enfrente* unfinished in post-production. Consequently, *Mysteries of Lisbon* - which was filmed while Ruíz battled liver cancer - will be the last completed work by the prolific and scandalously underrated Chilean maverick and this lavishly mounted and typically labyrinthine 272-minute adaptation of Camilo Castelo Branco's 1854 novel is a worthy last testament. This 'diary of suffering' requires several narrators to chart its sweep from the Portuguese capital through Spain, France and Italy to post-colonial Brazil in order to reveal how a 'frivolous game' became a 'sordid bourgeois drama'. But such is Ruíz's mastery of both cinematic and storytelling techniques that this Dickensian saga quickly becomes utterly engrossing.

With so many characters appearing in so many guises in so many times and places, it's best to restrict plot summaries to the basics. Nobleman José Afonso Pimentel starts the tale by recalling his unhappy childhood as a bullied stray (João Arrais) in the Catholic boarding school run by the kindly Adriano Luz. However, the 14 year-old's situation changes when he learns that his mother is countess Maria João Bastos, who was cruelly parted from her child's father and now lives a life of misery in the castle of her fiendishly vindictive husband, Albano Jeronimo.

As Arrais plays in his room with the puppet theatre that would become his constant companion, Luz takes over the narration to reveal that the monster hired by marquis Rui Morisson to kill both Bastos's lover and her new-born is now a dashing aristocrat (Ricardo Pereira), who is the toast of polite society and as ready to challenge a buck to a duel as he is seduce an innocent maiden. But the yarn takes another twist with the entry of French heiress Clotilde Hesme, who asks the besotted Pimental to dispatch Pereira (with whom she had once dallied) without knowing the part that he played in her admirer's past.

As the plot touches upon prostitution, war, treachery, spiritual anguish and social duplicity, chameleonic characters come and go at a dizzying rate that seems to spur Ruíz on to take the increasingly convoluted events at an even more breakneck lick. Ably abetted by a superb cast and an intricate, if occasionally operatic script by Carlos Saboga, Ruíz keeps André Szankowski's HD camera gliding through Isabel Branco's glorious sets to the accompaniment of Jorge Arriagada's swooningly romantic score.

Many will compare the result with Ruíz's majestic Proust adaptation, *Time Regained* (1999). But he seems more intent on paying tribute to Manuel De Oliveira - who adapted Castelo Branco's *Ill-Fated Love* in 1979 - than referencing his own oeuvre. But the asides on memory, status, duty, hypocrisy, caprice and coincidence have a familiar ring and the ever-mischievous Ruíz appears to delight in gently lampooning the conventions of the heritage movie by allowing the temperature occasionally to come close to tele-novelettish fever pitch. There's no question that this makes enormous demands on the audience. But those willing to pay close attention will be handsomely rewarded by the poignant New World denouement.