

A Superior Spoof on Skulduggery

By Judy Stone

There is nothing sacred, secret or subtle in "Nasty Habits," which might well be subtitled "How the Lady Abbess of Crewe met her Watergate."

Electronic bugs are hidden in the gilded garments of a plaster saint, and closed-circuit television, concealed by a painting of the Vatican, eavesdrops on the subversive activities of young novices in the embroidery room of this not very cloistered convent outside Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love and the site of Independence Hall.

Robert Enders' handsome production and witty screenplay has simply — and appropriately — transposed the setting of Muriel Sparks' novella, "The Abbess of Crewe," from the original British location.

"Nasty Habits" — at the Alexandria — makes no bones about its business of spoofing recent U.S. politics. What could be more shocking than sanctimonious skulduggery in the White House if it isn't



SUSAN PENHALIGON
As a rebellious nun

power plays in a House of God?

But surely, only David Frost or the last True Believers in Richard Nixon could take offense at this

put-on, which hits the high water laugh mark at — say — 80 per cent of the time. A degree of strain does set in with lines like "You won't have Sister Alexander to kick around anymore."

Glenda Jackson's natural look of hauteur has never been put to better comedic advantage than in her portrayal of the Sister who is determined to fulfill her manifest destiny and win election as Mother Superior. She is the logical choice of the dying Abbess, who goes out, in Edith Evans' sublime cameo, with dry and tart style.

Jackson manages to send Sister Gertrude back on her globe-trotting, do-gooding way, preaching birth control to the Moroccans and sundry salvations to the penguins and Chinese. (Melina Mercouri practically licks her chops with relish in this role.)

The major fly in Jackson's anointment, so to speak, is young Sister Felicity, snuggling in the garden with a Jesuit brother. When Felicity, charmingly played by Susan Penhaligon, isn't acting out the doctrine of love, she is proselytizing in the embroidery room on such heresies as the pointlessness of faith unless it helps mankind. (She is not quite so gone on Sisterhood as to call it "personkind.")

When Felicity's thimble is stolen in the dead of night by some overzealous Jesuits out to stop her campaign, she calls the cops, and goes public to pull the plug on convent conspiracies.

As the fall-guy, Sandy Dennis, assuming John Dean glasses, a dumb look and a neighingly nasal, self-righteous whine, is hilarious in her various disguises. Geraldine Page and Anne Jackson are the pair closest to the throne.

And it's a pleasure to watch Anne Meara whipping up team spirit among the football-playing nuns. Eli Wallach and Jerry Stiller as cardinals in Rome add their solemn confusion about the strange events in Philly.

The direction by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, making his first feature, is marvelously inventive and swiftly paced. The cinematography by Douglas Slocombe does striking justice to both its British interiors and Philadelphia locations.