

BRUIN REVIEW

The first review of *THE GREAT SADNESS OF ZOHARA* ran in UCLA's Daily Bruin, written by Sergio Fernandez, who meanwhile has died of AIDS, may he rest in peace.

Nina Menkes' 'Great Sadness of Zohara'

By Sergio Fernandez
Staff Writer

Chronicling an orthodox Jewish woman's spiritual search and desolation, Nina Menkes' *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, which will screen Sunday evening at Melnitz Theatre, is an example of UCLA filmmaking at its best. The movie follows a young woman (Tinka Menkes, the filmmaker's sister) as she travels from Jerusalem to remote villages in southern Morocco and back again while always remaining alienated. It's a portrait of personal disintegration—emotional, spiritual, psychological. And as we watch her staying in starkly empty rooms and wandering through crowded streets or barren landscapes, we get a feel for her inner state, we sink into it. It's an odyssey of searching, unfulfillment, and self-destruction and Menkes plunges inward, downward.

As we see Zohara among crowded village throngs or sitting in a café, we're acutely aware of her outsider status, of her not belonging. Not only does she not physically fit in—her hair, clothes, and sex setting her apart—she doesn't seem to be all there to begin with. Tinka Menkes is in practically every shot and her expression is sullen and dejected—there's something gnawing away at her. And as we see her on screen we hear a narration (From the Book of Job) describing what's going on inside her. She's cursed, she's hounded, she's guilty, yet what of we never know. At first we wait to see what will be revealed, what will happen, and then we realize that nothing is going to be externalized, the movie is about her inner state. Nothing is stated. Nothing is made clear, yet we watch this wandering modern-day Jew, unfulfilled in orthodox traditions, shiftless, uprooted, and aimless outside them, we sense what the film is getting at. (It has a distinctly modern consciousness and addresses itself to those that form part of that consciousness.) And as the film progresses, with the static long shots held longer, we're absorbed into it and it acquires an hypnotic quality.

Zohara was shot entirely on location in Israel and Morocco during the summer of 1981, with Nina and Tinka Menkes traveling alone and carting the film equipment around on public transportation. (They could probably make a couple of movies out of their experiences.) Partly funded by the Hortense Fishbough Memorial Award, Nina Menkes did her own camera work on top of directing. Technically, and especially visually, this 40 minute 16-millimeter film, which was made as her second film project in our Film Department, is a wonder. The photography and soundtrack (a mixture featuring the narration and music by Luciano Bario) are outstanding.

When a rough cut of *Zohara* was first screened in the Spring of 1982, it received mixed reactions about its length, some suggesting that it should be shortened. But Menkes chose, rightly, to keep it at its present length. What's been changed is the narration, which was formerly in the first person and is now in the third person. The difference is that before we perceived the voice-over as a verbal externalization of Zohara's thoughts, and the readings had a powerful psychic grip.

Now an objective observer seems to be commenting in her plight and the movie moves into a mystical realm, and dangerously murky terrain. We end up feeling more distanced and detached.

There are also a couple of things that could've used more elaboration. Zohara's journey from Jerusalem to Morocco—the Arab world, the “other” side for a Jew—is not sufficiently delineated. We see her on the train but it's hard to tell where she goes and if and when she returns. There's also a scene in which Zohara gets yanked by someone through a door and into a room that isn't fully rounded out or explained and leaves us in the air. Yet these observances boil down to little considering what Menkes has achieved.

It's an unabashedly, intense personal film and there can be no doubt that Menkes is going up against what many of us expect movies to be. She goes directly against the grain of what we've been conditioned to expect at the movies and that's a form of subversion. Not that these basically non-narrative meditative think pieces haven't been done before (e.g Duras), but what distinguishes *Zohara* is the force and command we feel in Menkes' work at such an early stage and her keen eye for visuals and composition and framing. And there's a commendable sort of heroism in her determined single mindedness because she's trying to get at something (Though it's surely less difficult to do when you don't have to worry about profits).

The movie's accessible but the simple facility we're used to getting from the movies denies us. She uses the film medium to try to recreate a state of mind, on a practically sub-conscious level, and what's unusual is how far she gets in *Zohara*. As casual moviegoers we might think what a pretentious bore! As constant ones we can see that there's something in what she's doing and a controlling intelligence behind it. And that the film itself, even though it's permeated with paranoia, hopelessness, and death, is a sign of life.

The Great Sadness of Zohara will get its premiere screening Sunday at seven-thirty at the Melnitz Theatre. The showing will be free and a reception, of course, will follow.