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SPECIAL SCREENINGS

Intense Emotion Fills 2 Menkes Films

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Nina Menkes' 40-minute "The Great Sadness of Zohara" (1983) and 90-minute "Magdalena Viraga" (1986) will be presented tonight at 8 by Filmforum at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. As with Menkes' most recent film, "Queen of Diamonds," they are marked by the filmmakers' ability to fill very long takes with emotion and meaning.

The first is a quietly compelling reverie centered on a young woman (Tinka Menkes) in the heart of Jerusalem. Through lingering images of beauty and desolation combined with keening sounds and fragments of poetry, Menkes expresses the woman's increasing sense of alienation from her Orthodox Jewish life that drives her to journey deeper and deeper into Arab lands. Menkes creates a portrait of intense isolation as the woman travels through vast deserts and wanders through ancient Arab quarters. This highly sensual, richly textured film of striking images creates a powerful sense of timelessness.

"Magdalena Viraga" is a boldly imaginative and rigorous experimental first feature in which Menkes evokes the spiritual awakening of a benumbed young prostitute (again, Tinka Menkes, the filmmaker's sister) in starkly beautiful imagery and in passages from the poetry of Mary Daly, Gertrude Stein and Anne Sexton.

Menkes draws upon seedy, vivid East Los Angeles locales to suggest an unnamed Latin police state to create a most realistic and compelling atmosphere in which her heroine's inner life begins to awaken. Although Menkes' sensibility is strongly feminist, she is concerned with the oppression of the individual regardless of sex. Mirroring the prostitute's thoughts and emotions is her colleague and friend (Claire Aguilar). "Magdalena Viraga" is a vaultingly ambitious work; so personal and impassioned is Menkes that she can skirt the pretentious without succumbing to it. Information: (213) 663-9568.

The Jon Jost Retrospective at UCLA concludes Saturday at 7:30 p.m. in Melnitz Theater with "Sure Fire" (1990), a real stunner, and "Rembrandt Laughing" (1988), one of the filmmaker's most challenging features.

Both films possess the rigor and incisiveness typical of Jost, but the first is far more accessible. "Sure Fire" is yet another of Jost's studies of a rural macho type under pressure.

Tom Blair is nothing less than astonishing as the fair-haired Wes, a dreamy but intense go-getter who believes fervently that his remote Utah town is a potential gold mine in providing homes for vacationers and retirees. His lifelong friend Larry (Robert Ernest), by contrast, is a quieter type in danger of losing his ranch yet not about to join forces with Wes. As abrasive as Wes is, you find yourself admiring him for his sheer determination but gradually realize you're watching a man so wound-up he's as hectoring and exhausting as a tent evangelist.

While the predominant tone of "Sure Fire" is emotional, that of "Rembrandt Laughing" is intellectual, recording a year in the lives of a group of young San Franciscans, centering on former lovers but enduring friends, Claire (Barbara Hammes) and Martin (Jon A. English, who also composed the film's jazz score).

Thick with intricate plotting and as doggedly observant and philosophical as a Godard film, "Rembrandt Laughing" in its title suggests how the great painter might react to witnessing all the *Angst* Jost's people experience. "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards," remarked Kierkegaard, whose quote keys the entire plot.

"Rembrandt Laughing" most certainly has a sense of life being lived over the period of a year in a mere 100 minutes; the obstacle for the viewer, however, is that there are so many people in the film that we don't get to know them well enough to become sufficiently involved in their fates. The result is a film that is impressive and worth the effort but such a tough go that you're hard put to keep your attention from wandering. Information: (213) 206-8013, 206-FILM.