

← Back to Original Article

## Defying Tradition in 'Mountain,' 'Zohara' : Movies: Hanna Elias' film condemns the custom of arranged marriages, while Nina Menkes' grapples with alienation from Orthodox Jewish life.

August 27, 1993 | KEVIN THOMAS | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Among several films set in Israel screening this week in the LA Festival are two that concern young women defying tradition. The first is Hanna Elias' "The Mountain," screening Friday, which is set in Elias' native Palestinian village in Northern Israel. In this beautifully realized 34-minute vignette, Elias condemns the custom of arranged marriages.

His film begins with a statement declaring that in communities such as his a woman could escape an arranged marriage only by eloping, which means that she could be shot to death while crossing over rugged mountain terrain or that she could be captured and forced into another arranged marriage. In Elias' film, his heroine (Rabieh Morkus) finds her grandmother (Massehia Assaf), rather than her mother, her strongest ally in risking death to marry for love.

Elias effectively employs non-professionals in all the key roles, including his own maternal grandmother, Assaf, now 106.

"People did not talk about this custom while I was growing up," said Elias, "and it stayed in my subconscious, only to surface when I was a student at UCLA. Away from the conservative society in which I was raised, I could look inside myself without outside interference. I was working on something else when the idea to do this film just popped up.

"I then got my mother to talk about this custom, and six months later I was talking to a Palestinian friend in San Diego and he told me that this treatment of women also had the same impact on him. Because of our political situation in the Mideast this issue is put on the back burner, but it shouldn't be--and, for me, it isn't! In my own family I had a cousin who did elope, and she got away and became immediately pregnant. No one will kill a pregnant mother.

"I had shot some film of my own family and was so impressed with my grandmother's presence on film that I persuaded her to appear in 'The Mountain.' She was 103 at the time--and only three weeks ago she danced at my cousin's wedding. I took my film home for everyone in the village to see it on a big screen. They were amazed to see themselves. It was a beautiful, very special experience for me, and, as a filmmaker, it will carry me for a long, long time."

The second film is Nina Menkes' 40-minute "The Great Sadness of Zohara" (1983), which screens Sunday at UCLA's Melnitz Theatre. It 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, the film 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.

"The Great Sadness of Zohara" is the second of five films that the Menkes sisters, who are in their 30s, have made in the last decade. It began when Nina Menkes wanted to make a film about how she was affected by a serious illness that Tinka had suffered.

"When I got well Nina wanted me to play myself, but that would have been too weird, too strange, after all I had gone through. So we got another actress to play me, and I played Nina--I've been playing Nina ever since!" said Tinka in a phone interview.

The nature and extent of Tinka's behind-the-camera collaboration with Nina has varied from film to film, but on screen Tinka, an ethereal, dark-haired beauty, has always been the dominant, often solitary presence.

"I want the filming to go on forever, but afterward I really crash," she said. "Working with Nina is really exhausting because she's so intense, but it's the best for me because I am such an integral part of the process."

### L.A. FESTIVAL TODAY

\* "ULYSSES JENKINS, HABIB KHERADYAR, KEVIN MILLER and MATTHEW THOMAS (Brand Library Art Galleries, Glendale. 7 p.m. reception; 8 p.m. performance). Installations, performance and videophone; performances with the Othervisions Art Band.

\* "SACRED LANDMARKS" (Our Lady of Lourdes, Los Angeles. 8 p.m.). Singer-songwriter Lalo Guerrero celebrates 50 years of making music with songs that reflect his Mexican-American culture, accompanied by Marcos and Willie Loya, on guitar and percussion. Also performing: Mexican folk group Quetzalcoatl.

\* "SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK" (Wadsworth Theater. 8 p.m.). A performance by the renowned women's a cappella group. Sign-language interpreter provided.

\* "LINDA HOPKINS" (J. Paul Getty Museum. 8 p.m.). The L.A.-based blues singer performs as part of the Getty Museum Concert Series.

\* "CROSSING LA: THERE TO HERE"(Vision Complex, Leimert Park. 8 p.m.). Voices of liberation from African women from the diaspora: theater and dance from Africa (Akyuoe), the islands (Haitian dance by Linda Fay Johnson) and America (Joyce Guy, Come 2Gether 4The Arts and visual artist Noni Olebisi).

\* "THE SERPENT'S TALE"(Museum of Flying, Santa Monica, 7 p.m. film). Also, with "SEX, LIES, RELIGION" by Annette Kennerly. Co-presented by the Gay and Lesbian Media Coalition.

\* "THE FIRE THIS TIME"(Melnitz, Theatre, UCLA. 7:30 p.m.). Film by Rene Maxwell. Four African-American women react to violence against their Jewish neighbors during the 1992 L.A. uprising. "THE MOUNTAIN" by Hanna Elias. A young Palestinian woman takes control of her life, defying her family, religious authority and tradition. "BERLIN JERUSALEM" by Amos Gitai. Traces the lives of two visionary women, German Expressionist poet Elsa Lasker-Schuler and Russian revolutionary Manya Shohat.

*Readers are advised to call the Los Angeles Festival, (800) 6-LA FEST, for specifics regarding hours and events, and availability of tickets. Tickets are available at (800) FEST-TIX.*