



Film Reviews

The Bloody Child

By Godfrey Cheshire

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A Menkesfilm production for the Independent Television Service with funds provided in part by the Corp. for Public Broadcasting and the American Film Institute, in association with the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. Produced, directed by Nina Menkes. A soldier's murder of his wife prompted filmmaker Nina Menkes to imagine the events surrounding the crime in "The Bloody Child," a nonlinear, decidedly unconventional evocation of one trauma's ripple effects. Mesmerizing if very opaque compared with standard dramas, impressionistic feature is ideal for the most adventurous auds at festivals and specialized sites.

Rather than telling a story in the usual way, pic creates a uniquely compelling mood of distress and menace. Initial images show the guilty soldier being discovered by fellow Marines in the Mojave Desert in the eerie half-light of pre-dawn. He has come there to dig a grave, and his wife's bloodied corpse is found in his car on a nearby highway.

Pic returns repeatedly to scenes of the soldier being held, interrogated and sometimes verbally attacked by military police on the roadside where the evidence of his crime remains. Usually these passages are filmed from a distance with long lenses, for an effect that's both documentary-like and suggestively voyeuristic.

What's heard here isn't dialogue so much as snatches of conversation among the soldiers as they await transport for their prisoner, who's never seen full-on but only from the rear or side, usually slumped in the back of one of the M.P. vehicles.

The ultra-realistic air is interrupted, startlingly, when an enormous black stallion comes galloping into a crime scene. While the explanation for his sudden appearance may be entirely mundane, the impact is hauntingly surreal.

If these scenes are the film's thematic center, the significant periphery is sketched in other episodes, observed in the same distanced, de-dramatized manner, that take place in locales that include a nearby country-music bar and rural Africa.

The real murder re-created in the film reportedly involved a soldier recently returned from the Gulf War, which perhaps helps explain this chronicle's associative leaps. In the

largest sense, pic's poetic approach disturbingly evokes a pervasive tapestry of psychic and actual violence by examining a couple of its threads. There are feminist as well as political ramifications here, surely, yet pic leaves it to the viewer to decipher -- or supply -- them.

At a time when experimental filmmaking is in retreat, the craft and bold unconventionality of the "The Bloody Child" are challenging in the most bracing sense. Pic weaves a spell that's hard to shake for days afterward, and offers an object lesson in the cinematic possibilities that standard narrative misses.

Pic benefits greatly from helmer Menkes' sharp, textured lensing and idiosyncratic use of sound. Overall, tech credits are extremely well-realized.

Camera (color), Menkes. Conceived, edited by Menkes, Tinka Menkes. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Frontier), Jan. 22, 1996. Running time: 85 MIN.

With: Tinka Menkes, Sherry Sibley, Russ Little, Robert Mueller, Jack O'Hara.