

## Interview

### Nina Menkes discusses her 'Bloody Child'

**By Sara Gilson**

Contributing Writer

With her third film, "The Bloody Child," award-winning independent filmmaker Nina Menkes gets under your skin, crafting a disturbing, surreal portrait of violence that has a trance-like and hypnotic effect on its audience.

"The Bloody Child" premiered at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival and has been invited to a number of other major worldwide festivals including Locarno, Montreal, Rotterdam and the Viennale. It has been hailed by Gus Van Sant as "One of the year's great films by one of my favorite filmmakers," and called "Beautiful ... one of the most provocative artists in film today," by Kevin Thomas of the Los Angeles *Times*. This is definitely a film to go and see--a film that will take you psychologically and emotionally to a place where most films do not even dare to go.

The "Bloody Child" will play at the Nuart Theater for five days, opening Thursday, Oct. 24, and showing through Monday, Oct. 28. Her earlier films will also play at the Nuart as a Nina Menkes Retrospective beginning with her first feature, "Magdalena Viraga," on Saturday, Nov. 2, at noon and "Queen of Diamonds," which will be shown along with Menkes' first 16mm short film, "The Great Sadness of Zohara," on Sunday, Nov. 2, at noon.

**SG:** You are a "self-proclaimed witch." Can you explain what context this self-description has in terms of your filmmaking?

**NM:** Well, I use that word in a couple of different ways . One is that it's an image of female power and it's also a derogatory word for women. People will say, "Oh, she's a witch; she's a bitch." So I use it also a little bit in the way such as the way that recently gay people have used the word "queer" as an affirmative--like "queer theory"--and that it's right. In other words, it has a little bit of that feeling too, like "Yes, I'm a witch. I'll claim the shadow definition--the negative definition--that you're trying to put on me. I'll claim it, and I'll empower it." But it also has to do with the idea that I have that cinema is sorcery--that it's actually an act of witchcraft, of conjuring, that the whole film exists. And it's an act of conjuring on more than one level, because there's the psychic, emotional world of conjure. But also, as a producer, to conjure yourself a whole 35mm film in color in the desert with your sister when you have no money. I mean, that's kind of a conjuring act, too.

**SG:** What was your experience at UCLA like?

**NM:** Well, I had a really fantastic film school experience, because when I went to UCLA there were no rules at all and you could just make your films. There were no real classes. It was just sort of an extended independent study and I made my first feature film there, which also ended up being my thesis, "Magdalena Viraga." It won the Los Angeles Film Critics Award as Best Independent Film of the Year, so it was really exciting.

**SG:** How was it that your UCLA thesis film ended up feature-length and what was it like for you that the film was so successful?

**NM:** I was in film school along with Alison Anders, and people were very impressed by the success of "Stranger Than Paradise." Everyone was totally convinced that in order to break out of total anonymity you had to make a feature film and that shorts would get you nowhere. So I wrote this film and I didn't even know if it would end up being a feature or not. But when we shot it and edited it, it was 90 minutes long. It just sort of came out 90 minutes, so it really wasn't like we made the decision to make a feature. But even though the film had a lot of critical acclaim, it did not get wider distribution. I believe it was because the political content of the film was very radical and, I guess, very threatening to those who want to control us, especially the distribution--i.e., men.

When we finished "Magdalena Viraga," we got this prize that no one would have dreamed of getting--this huge prize--and I thought, "Well, that's it. If you get a huge prize like that, then why shouldn't you be in theaters?" I mean, what more could they ask for? It's beautifully shot, it's gotten a huge prize, everyone's really excited about it. What's the problem? It took me a long time to realize that if I was going to do my own thing, I was going to walk this really hard path that I don't even want to be walking. I'd be happy to live in Malibu and be a big, highly paid movie director, but since I don't have dumb little narratives and objectified females, then I guess I'll have to walk this path. Yes, you get politicized if you interface with a reality.

I felt on a certain level that "Magdalena Viraga," even though it got a lot of notice, was never shown as it should have been shown. I really had a feeling that my own labor as a filmmaker on a certain level, for political reasons, was unrewarded.

**SG:** Can you describe how "The Bloody Child" came together?

**NM:** Well, it came together really slowly and organically. We had shot the footage in Africa a long time ago. When I was shooting with Tinka in Africa, I was shooting scenes about a very pained figure of a woman in a non-Western setting. And I had various ideas about it--this sort of fractured female figure. And when we came back to L.A. and we saw the dailies we thought, "Wow. This is intense, beautiful work but it's not a whole movie; it's not a whole piece," so we put it aside and saved it. Then when I read in the L.A. *Times* about a U.S. Marine who had just come back from the Persian Gulf and was found in the middle of the Mojave Desert digging a grave for his murdered wife, we started thinking about it. First, Tinka was going to play the murdered wife and then she decided that playing a murdered wife would be a terrible, destructive thing to do and also a waste of her acting talent (to lie there dead the whole time). And then we came up with the idea that she would be one of the marines. She would be the arresting officer and we found that to be a lot more exciting for a lot of reasons. It also implicates me in an identification with the marines and then in the position of the murderer and I have a lot of internalized "stuff" about self-hatred, self-loathing and hatred of the feminine. So the figure of Tinka in the African footage became the underside of that female marine--this wounded inner feminine, just really, really painful. That's basically how the film came about.

**SG:** Aside from Tinka, all of the actors and your crew were local to your location, Twenty-nine Palms in the Mojave Desert. Why did you choose to do this and how did it work?

**NM:** We put an ad on the military radio out in Twenty-nine Palms and we got all these marines to come in for interviews. So all these marines were dropping by the motel, and we put the camera up and just to have something to say to the marines, I said, "I'm just

going to record you on video, how do you feel about the marines?" They said various things, but more or less they all said, "I really like the discipline and I really like the uniform." So we heard this about 12 times and then this guy came in and said, "I think the marine corps is really not a place which fosters individuality and creativity." I thought that this was very interesting and Tinka had the idea that I should ask him to be my assistant director. So we spoke to him and told him about the film and he was really excited, so he became the liaison of the marines and he became my assistant director. He got all of his friends to act in the movie, so we had that connection with somebody who had a real sympathy to what we were doing.

**SG:** "The Bloody Child" has been described as in some ways a "meditation on violence." Can you talk about what you think is meant by this?

**NM:** I think one reason people have used the word "meditation" is that the film doesn't offer a normal narrative. If you go into the film expecting a story about a marine, you're not going to get it. It's like a swirling meditation, structurally. The people who get into that movie sort of go into a trance watching it; they kind of go into this other zone. I think that is where the word "meditation" comes up. The film is structured so that instead of identifying with a certain character--usually a film is structured to identify with a certain character--the film is structured so that if you get into it, you actually identify with all of the participants. You identify with the constellation rather than identify with one character or one actor within a constellation.

I use the word "extreme cinema" to describe my films because they push emotional, psychic and cinematic boundaries in narrative.

**SG:** You are the only woman alive who produces, directs, shoots and in most cases edits your own 35mm feature films. Is this a personal choice?

**NM:** There are plenty of people who would have liked to work on "The Bloody Child" and participate, but I really love doing everything. I would really like more help with the distribution and promotional side of it, and it would be nice to have more money to pay the people that help me, but as far as making the film, I really wouldn't abandon any of those roles.

**SG:** As well as making films, you also teach directing in the USC School of Cinema-Television graduate division. What do you feel is important for your students to know aside from the basics, and how would you hope to influence them?

**NM:** Well, one of the things that I think is the most important is that they actually see a living, breathing human being--who also happens to be a woman--who is not afraid to do what I'm doing. I think for a lot of the students, just seeing that I exist is kind of a radical act because they think, "You can't do this." Well, I can, and I'm on my third feature, and the work is thought by a lot of people to be good work. It's not like you're doing everything and the work comes out very sloppy so you better get some help. I try to teach my students the idea that for a film to be exciting, it should be an expression of your own personal perception of the universe, and not just your story stuck into a predetermined form that has already been laid out.