

BULLETT

Director Nina Menkes on Knowledge, Faith, and Film

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In 'Dissolution,' a modern-day Raskolnikov grapples with questions of redemption and morality in a Tel Aviv setting. Nina Menkes sat down with us to discuss her own concepts of faith, knowledge, and belief.



The world of Nina Menkes films borrows from many influences—think Maya Deren plus Chantal Akerman plus plot. But at the same time, there are no clear debts. From her debut feature, *Magdalena Viraga* in 1987, to 2010's *Dissolution*, Menkes has created a body of work which combines otherworldly, dream-like aesthetics with subtle intellectual commentary. We sat down with Menkes to discuss *Dissolution*, a loose take on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, whose American release is being honored this year with a full-blown retrospective at Anthology Film Archives.

In a previous interview, someone brought up that *Dissolution* is your first film with a male lead. I thought that was a funny point for someone to bring up.

Dissolution stars Didi Fire, and it's true that it's the first time I've had a male lead in one of my films. But I've been tracking what an inner female figure in myself. My characters are these iconic women in different, usually harsh, brutal situations, and that's been true from my first film all the way through *Phantom Love*—in which the woman character

has a certain release at the end from this brutal situation that I've been tracking for all these years in my films. I work really intuitively and I live in Tel Aviv and I got this idea. The idea is very loosely inspired by *Crime and Punishment*, with the main character somehow jumping off of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov in contemporary-day Tel Aviv. I didn't think, 'now I'm going to make a film with a male character', it was more that this character and this story called me. Later I realized that it seemed to be logical from an interior perspective that when this female character that I've been working with for all these years in the films came to a certain resolution or came to a certain point of healing or liberation that my inner antennae would go to this inner male figure. So, although the film has a male lead, it's still looking at the same issues that I always look at. It's looking at them from the other side, from another angle. I think it's very meaningful that after all this time there was a male character, but in a way the women are still the center of the film. He's the center of course, we're following him, but it's definitely from the feminine point of view.

How was it that *Crime and Punishment* came to you as a story you knew you wanted to film?

I had been invited to teach film at Tel Aviv University for a year. My roots are in Israel—my parents actually came from Israel to the United States, I was born here, but I speak Hebrew and I'm really connected to Israel in a lot of ways because I'm a dual citizen. And actually, a German citizen—I have three passports. The German passport was given to me with restitution, re-naturalization for the losses to my family. My German-Jewish family. My mom was a baby when Hitler came to power and my father's whole family was gassed by the Nazis except for him. The thinking is that if that hadn't happened I would be a German citizen. I emphasize my background because it's not like I'm just an American in Israel for a year, I have a much deeper connection to the place than that. I was in Israel for a year, and I was living in—the Arabs call it Jaffa, the Israelis call it Yafo—the sort of Arab area of Tel Aviv, and I was just absorbing the atmosphere. I was only there for a year so I thought, I should do *something*. Maybe I'll just make a documentary about all the cats—there are millions of wild cats in Yafo—and then I had come across *Crime and Punishment* at a friend's house and I felt like having something to read, it was somewhat random. And as I was reading it, I had this very strong kind of feeling that Dostoyevsky's story had a great deal, on a deep level, to do with the situation there and with what I felt there. The quality of the main character, the darkness, the guilt, the confusion, the desire for redemption on some level, the violence—and all of these things felt so resonant to me that I got really excited about the idea of trying to do that in that place. Then I wrote the script and got a grant from the Rabinovitch foundation, it all happened really fast. Everybody knows it takes a million years to get a film made, so it really felt like God was with us because of the speed with which it happened and the way the money came together. It was all somewhat miraculous.

I liked the moment, somewhat at the beginning, when two characters are having a conversation about the difference between believing in ghosts, and believing that people have seen ghosts. I wanted to ask you what—for you—is the difference between knowing and believing?

That's a pretty profound philosophical issue. They're trying to have that discussion, that's the essence of it. I *know* I'm in LA, I don't have to believe it because I know it, but

I *believe* that higher powers conspired to allow me to make *Dissolution* in Tel Aviv, which was against all odds. Belief comes when you don't have what we would normally see as concrete proof. But I almost have concrete proof that a higher power was with me. I had received this grant from the Rabinovitch foundation to make the film, but it was short, about 25% of the budget was not there. The money I got from the film did not allow me to have a salary and I couldn't stay for another year, I had to return to the US to go back to my day job, so to speak, which is teaching at California Institute of the Arts. Basically I needed to get a chunk of money in a month. So I sent these SOS emails to everyone I knew in LA like 'oh my god, I got this grant and I have this great idea, here's the script, we just need a chunk!' Suddenly I got an email from a woman called Rebecca Hartzell who said 'I have a feeling that Michael Huffington will really love your work'. Somehow she managed to find his contact info and get through to him. She sent him some information about the movie, he went to my website, he agreed to come in as a producer without having met me in person. We didn't even have a phone conversation, he just believed in the project based on the material he was sent, *and* – this is why I thought a higher power was arranging the whole thing—it turned out that Michael Huffington had been listening to *Crime and Punishment* on tape while driving cross country. He himself is a religious person and he felt that was a sign. So within two or three weeks of the whole thing, he wired the funds to my producer in Tel Aviv and we went into production. I was like, 'okay'—can I say I *know* higher powers are arranging stuff, or I *believe* higher powers are arranging stuff? I practically have to say I know they're arranging stuff, it was so beyond chance for that to happen. And for it to happen in a split second of time. If it hadn't happened in those three or four weeks, the whole film would never have happened. That was totally incredible. It really makes you feel like there are guiding angels flying around. It's hard not to believe and know.

There are so few instances in which faith translates to money like that.

It's divine intervention, there's no doubt about it. I hear you, on believe vs. know. It's hard to call. It was like how could that have happened in 'normal life'?

And what's next for you?

I'm very excited about my new project. It's called *Heat Stroke*, and I received a grant from Creative Capital in New York. I'm working with the casting director Vicki Thomas who is extraordinary, and we're looking for 'serious movie stars' to be in this piece. The executive producer is Gus Van Sant. We first met at Sundance when I showed my film *Queen of Diamonds*. It's my most expensive film, as well as my most ambitious. It's set in LA and Cairo, Egypt, it's movie stars, lots of production elements, but it's a really exciting story and it's very topical right now to what's happening in the world. It's very much about the split between the West and the Arab world, and certain elements of the script, which I wrote a long time ago, have since seemed to come true. It was almost like the script was prophetic. There are these scenes in the film that I had written of these wild demonstrations in the streets of Egypt, before any of that happened. It was really trippy. And then the main characters, it's two sisters, two women, and there's a split between them. There's a celebrity whose LA-based, and the other sister is the wife of a diplomat stationed in Cairo. So the split between the two sisters kind of mirrors the split between the west and the Arab world, and it plays out in my usual style of fragmented narrative and surreal, dream-like atmosphere, but at the same time tied into a very harsh political reality.

I would imagine there would be a lot of confrontation and discussion about the politics. There's so much journalism about that subject, but you don't see that much fiction about it.

Right. And the thing about the film—like you said, there's a lot of discussion, a lot of intellectualizing and confrontation—but it's really an emotional exploration on a kind of dream level. All my films are kind of surreal, dreamy narratives in this kind of zone of the subconscious, or the unconscious. The story is the inner picture of this situation, as opposed to talking about politics or something like that. It's the deep inner emotional aspect.

The Nina Menkes Retrospective will run at Anthology Film Archives from March 9th-16th.