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SPECIAL SCREENINGS

Poetry And Passion In 'Magdalena'

November 10, 1986 | KEVIN THOMAS | Times Staff Writer

"Magdalena Viraga" (UCLA Melnitz at 8 p.m. Tuesday) is a boldly imaginative and rigorous experimental first feature in which writer/director/cinematographer Nina Menkes evokes the spiritual evolution of a benumbed young prostitute (played by Tinka Menkes, the film maker'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 L.A. 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, her concern is 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 in which Menkes shows that she can hold a scene as long as Antonioni can and get away with it. So personal and impassioned is Menkes that she skirts the pretentious without ever succumbing to it. "Magdalena Viraga" is a stunner. Information: (213) 825-2345, 825-2581.

"Made in French," a collection of six short fiction films from France, screens Friday through Sunday at 8:15 p.m. at the Lhasa Club, 1110 N. Hudson St.

With a combined running time of about 90 minutes, the program proves to be a delight, refreshingly sophisticated and subtle. All the films have a wry bite that gives a unified tone to their presentation. Maurice Frydland's darkly comic "The Topsy-Turvy Heart" opens with a young couple with a child accepting a farm job only to be confronted with an unexpected development--and an even more unexpected reaction to it.

Serge Cousture's "The Personal Ad" tells of a professional assassin who specializes in putting elderly people out of their misery while Ulysse Laugier's "Order, or the Golden Mean" also centers on a killer, a compulsive type who can't resist straightening up an apartment as he awaits his victim. All three of the above are wonderfully detached and understated vignettes, amusing yet at the same time illuminating solitary souls.

The film noir, B-movie-detective spoof is by now a cliché, yet Takis Candilis' "The Return of the Private Eye" manages to elicit smiles with its deliberately fake Monogram-style sets and its hard-boiled Hammett-Chandler dialogue rendered into French (which in turn is translated into English subtitles that are funny in themselves). Candilis persuaded the well-known Jean-Pierre Kalfon to play his two-fisted investigator, Rick Leland.

With Thomas Gilou's "The Giraffe Scam," "Made in French" saves the funniest for the last. A convict, paroled from an eight-month sentence for welfare fraud, rushes to meet the girl with whom he's had a lonely hearts correspondence when a ruefully perverse twist of fate stuns him like a little boy whose ice cream has been knocked from its cone. French Cultural Services and the Lhasa Club will present six more shorts the same time and place next week. Information: (213) 461-7284.

"The Legend of Surami Fortress" (1985) and "Scheherazade's 1002nd Night" (1984), which screen this week in the UCLA Film Archives "Salute to the Soviet Republics," are both fanciful tales with stunning Arabic settings, and both are hard to follow--English narration to supplement the subtitles is much-needed--but that's where the resemblance ends.

Directed by Tadjikstani film maker Takhir Sabirov, the second (screening Sunday at 5 p.m.) is the familiar--and meandering--story of a young man who must prove himself to earn the reward of a beautiful princess. The first, which screens Saturday at 7:30 p.m., is another matter entirely, a lush Georgian tale of revenge and sacrifice from Dodo Abashidze and Sergei Paradjanov, more dazzling and satisfying than Paradjanov's celebrated "Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors."

"The Legend of Surami" proceeds as a series of mystically beautiful tableaux that possess the compelling impact of icons.