

Queen Of The Damned

BY RAY GREENE

Few filmmakers are as persistently at war with the narrative and expository assumptions of commercial cinema as independent writer/director/cinematographer Nina Menkes. With *Queen of Diamonds*, her second feature-length work, Menkes again proves herself one of the more compelling new voices in American film, an evocative cine-poet boldly pursuing a singular and highly personal vision of her art form.

Unlike in *Magdalena Viraga*, the ambitious first feature Menkes shot as a student project at UCLA, there is not even a tenuous plot-line in *Queen of Diamonds* to which viewers can attach their prefabricated moviegoing responses. Focusing on a Las Vegas casino card dealer (again played by Menkes' stunningly beautiful sister/collaborator Tinka), *Queen of Diamonds* is delineated in entirely anecdotal terms, with the fragmentary and incidental elevated by Menkes to the primary position occupied in most films by the connect-the-dot mechanics of Hollywood-style plot structure.

With *Magdalena Viraga*, Menkes was already evolving an environmental approach to moviemaking, where long, static takes are utilized to create a sort of existential stasis reminiscent of Resnais. Menkes takes this approach even further in *Queen of Diamonds*—the seeming randomness of her event structure and her liberating disdain for the tyrannical and condescending



luck of the draw

assumptions most filmmakers hold about their audiences in fact flow organically out of an almost Zola-like preoccupation with anthropological detail.

The unnamed Queen of Diamonds is, like most of us, a passenger in her own life; even the initially sensual rhythms of her job at the casino are reduced by excruciating repetition to deadening routine in one elongated sequence that is the centerpiece of the film (the parallel in *Magdalena Viraga* was Menkes' prostitute-heroine's redundant sexual encounters, filmed as a form of rape). It's as if Menkes' Magdalena character, depicted

as an automaton still capable of anguish over her predicament, had moved to Vegas and surrendered to the dehumanizing influences assailing her. So distrustful of emotionalism has Menkes become that the searing feminist rage informing *Magdalena* is reduced here to a series of muted, oddly pathetic asides, with the (again) mostly faceless male figures who drift in and out of the Queen's life defined as mere annoyances, an alien form of vegetation in a dead landscape.

There's a ravishing, hallucinatory eloquence to Menkes' cinematography and staging in *Queen of Diamonds* quite unlike the more self-conscious stylization of *Magdalena Viraga*. She carefully avoids the photo-opportunity version of Las Vegas—there are no towering neon edifices or googie architectural landmarks here—shooting the terrain instead as an empty, quasi-lunar landscape, a perfect extension of her protagonist's joyless existence. Whether Menkes' perspective is a manifestation of despair is an open question—unlike the equally distended creations of Antonioni, Menkes' characters in *Queen of Diamonds* seem to live in a realm where even hopelessness, as a last vestige of feeling, might be viewed as a sentimentality.

Menkes leaves it to her viewers to decipher (or perhaps to create) the meanings they take away with them. That, ultimately, is the greatest of the many intellectual challenges available in this stimulating, provocative work. □

Queen of Diamonds

starring
Tinka Menkes

directed by
Nina Menkes

screenplay
Nina Menkes

Menkes Film

(November 5 at UCLA's Melnitz Theatre,
November 29 at the NuArt Theatre)