

Nina Menkes' 'Magdalena' a Stunning Feature Debut

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Five years after its completion—and garnering festival praise and prizes in the interim—Nina Menkes' groundbreaking "Magdalena Viraga" (at the AFI USA Independent Showcase at the Monica 4-Plex) is ever a stunner. It is a boldly imaginative and rigorous first feature in which writer-director-cinematographer Menkes evokes the spiritual evolution of a benumbed young prostitute (Tinka Menkes, the filmmaker's remarkably expressive sister) in starkly beautiful imagery and in passages from the poetry of Mary Daly, Gertrude Stein and Anne Sexton.

Menkes draws upon seedy, vivid L.A. locales to suggest an unnamed Latin American police state to create a most realistic and compelling atmosphere in which her heroine's inner life begins to awaken. The film is largely taken up with moving back and forth between the garish flop house bedrooms (where Tinka Menkes' Ida services her steady stream of clients with bleak impassivity) and the prison cell where police take her with equal frequency for reasons political rather than moral. Eventually, she is arrested for a murder she probably did not commit.

Early on Ida tells a cop that what she likes most is being where she is—and that most emphatically she is "not here." Seeking escape in her imagination, Ida at one point, while with a customer, sees instead of an ordinary ceiling a mosaic of Jesus on the ceiling of a church dome. With this deft, single image, Menkes marks the conscious beginning of Ida's spiritual awakening, expressed in enigmatic, prophetic remarks; it's not for nothing

that the film is subtitled "The Story of a Red Sea Crossing." The film's title identifies Ida with Mary Magdalene—and a virago, one of doggedly passive resistance, however.

Although Nina Menkes' sensibility is strongly feminist, linking the brutality of the police mentality with the plight of women, she clearly is concerned with the oppression of the individual regardless of gender; surely, too, sex is as joyless for her johns as it is for Ida. Mirroring Ida's thoughts and emotions—and representing female solidarity—is her friend and colleague (Claire Aguilar).

So personal and impassioned is Menkes that she can skirt the pretentious without ever succumbing to it. "Magdalena Viraga" (Times-rated Mature for adult themes and situations) is a vaultingly ambitious work in which Menkes shows she can hold a shot as long as Antonioni can and get away with it.

'Magdalena Viraga'

Tinka Menkes.....	Ida
Claire Aguilar.....	Claire
Writer-producer-director-cinematographer-editor Nina Menkes. All musical numbers performed by Grupo Traveso. Sound Duane Dell'Amico. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes	
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