

# 'Diamonds' like dark jewel

## Film shows reality's grim side

By Michael R. Forrest  
Staff Writer

Out this week on video is USC cinema faculty member Nina Menkes' celebrated minimalist movie "Queen of Diamonds." Starring Menkes' sister Tinka, this haunting film explores the decay and alienation of post-pop America, in an uncompromising "raw red meat staring at you from the end of your fork" manner.

Tinka Menkes plays a casino dealer whose husband has disappeared. Any plot, however, takes a back seat to dark realities and existential alienation in this evocative and masterful work.

### Profile



Picture the unexpected. Picture elephants surrounding an accident. Picture time moving as slow as life. Two people standing in a barren field watch a palm tree burn. One of them leaves the camera's view and the other remains until there is nothing left of the top of the tree but charred black.

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### Just the facts

What: "Queen of Diamonds"  
Who: Nina Menkes  
Where: In video stores



Tinka Menkes stars in her sister Nina's movie as a casino dealer whose husband has disappeared.





In a recent interview over lunch, vivacious Nina Menkes turned out to be a wonderfully engaging conversationalist — a characteristic one doesn't always expect of artists.

She spoke of her experiences living with the Bedouins in the Sinai desert. She named them as one of the major influences which have shaped her artistry.

"Living with the Bedouins totally affected me," she said, "Their whole sense about time. I went there when it was first occupied by Israel . . . I lived right under the stars. (The Bedouins) were much more experiential than goal-oriented. Ambition and goals — they're not part of their universe. Everything is just slowly experiential. They'll just sit and watch the water for just three hours. Then they'll have a little tea. They have levels of relaxation we can't conceive of. It's so great, coming

from the West, it's kind of like a Zen experience. And I find them beautiful, physically."

Menkes' "Queen of Diamonds" was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in 1991 and was on a "ten-best" movie list in the *Los Angeles Times*. It is her third film with her sister Tinka, who also starred in her "Magdalena Viraga."

In "Magdalena," Tinka Menkes played a prostitute who is growing tired of the trade. She seems to be suffocating as she lies, cadaverous, under the strangers' bodies. Shot in seedy squalor on location in East L.A. — in the bars, public baths and hotels — the film is as comfortless as it is oddly transcendent.

"other side — the darker side of life" that Menkes visits in all her films — a place from which one can never come back unscarred — she said, "You have to jump off the precipice, otherwise you can't get liberated . . . I think by working through these other sides, through these painful areas, through the impression and confronting it, you can experience life more fully, on a min-

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— *Nina Menkes, USC cinema faculty member*

"We're very committed to a certain kind of work," said Menkes of the films she's made starring her sister. ". . . a certain shamanistic kind of work with film."

Like many other directors, Nina Menkes became a filmmaker in a very roundabout way.

"When I was a teenager and in my early twenties, I was a very serious dancer and a choreographer," Menkes said. "I was living in London and one of my aunts had given me a super-eight camera and I had this idea of making a dance film."

"And then one of my roommate's boyfriends was in a London film school and he was supposed to make a film and he had no ideas of what to do. So my roommate said, 'Well, why don't you make Nina's ideas?' So I got my dance film made on 16 mm with a lot of high production values instead of a little thing. And when I saw the end product I got really excited about it . . ."

When asked if she doesn't feel danger journeying into the

ute-to-minute basis."

Menkes also said she is uninterested in shooting a big-budget film and becoming part of the mainstream.

"I'm into zero compromise. Do or die! My goal is not to make a film, my goal is personal liberation. What's the point of making Hollywood films? So I can go to a party with Oliver Stone? I think he's an asshole. I'd have somebody telling me, cut this scene out, I don't like the ending, you can't cast your sister, you have to cast Julia Roberts. In which case, what's the point? Why bother? Angela Carter says, 'If it's not blasphemous, why bother making it?'"

Finishing a bird's-size portion of lunch, Menkes also discussed her feelings about the Clinton/Gore victory. "I'm ecstatic about the elections — not that I think Bill Clinton's Snow White or anything, but I'm so happy to get those Republicans out of the White House. They're pure, unadulterated criminals."

Menkes is optimistic about the future. "I think we're headed for global liberation."