

READER

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THE BLOODY CHILD

(1996) directed by Nina Menkes.
With Tinka Menkes, Russ Little,
Sherry Sibley, Jack O'Hara
Robert Mueller

by Jonathan Rosenbaum

ARRESTING IMAGES

For several weeks I've been arguing with myself about *The Bloody Child*, the fourth film and third feature of Nina Menkes—an obsessive minimalist movie that fails to satisfy me but refuses to leave me alone. This deeply threatening American feature is getting its first extended run in Chicago this week. Chicago's Facets-Video recently brought out on tape all of Menkes's previous films—*The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1984), *Magdalena Viraga* (1987), and *Queen of Diamonds* (1991)—and I've been seeing and rereading these as well, mainly because I can't decide what to do with them, either. "For me," the director says, "cinema is sorcery," and there's little doubt in my mind that all of her work casts a spell.

All four films star Menkes's sister Tinka, who's also credited as co-conceiver and co-editor. Nina is credited as producer, cinematographer, director, co-conceiver, and co-editor. As sisterly collaborations, these works, to the best of my knowledge, have no parallel in movies. Tinka Menkes plays a different character in each film—a Jewish girl who leaves Israel for Morocco in *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, a prostitute who murders her pimp in *Magdalena Viraga*, a Las Vegas blackjack dealer in *Queen of Diamonds* (my favorite Menkes film), and a marine captain in California as well as various undefined characters or guises of the same undefined character in Northeast Africa in *The Bloody Child*—and in all of these parts she seems to figure to some degree as her sister's surrogate or alter ego, making her way through a male-dominated universe.

The Bloody Child was inspired by a real incident reported in *The Los Angeles Times*: a young U.S. marine, recently back from fighting in the Gulf War, murdered his wife and was caught trying to bury her in the Mojave Desert by two military policemen on patrol. The arresting officer in the film is the marine captain played by Tinka Menkes, but *The Bloody Child* doesn't proceed like a crime story in any ordinary sense; the focus is on the arrest rather than on the crime, which is never shown. We're also taken into the lives of the captain and other soldiers in the area (29 Palms, the site of the largest U.S. Marine base). The disembodied voice of the murdered wife is heard periodically (much of what she says comes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*),

but she never figures as a character in any ordinary sense; she's mythologized, while the husband himself remains unknowable.

With the exception of Tinka Menkes, all the actors in the film were active marines and veterans of Desert Storm, and the realism of their dialogue—most of which they wrote or improvised themselves—puts most Hollywood filmmaking to shame. (Set this film alongside *Courage Under Fire*, which also deals with the Gulf War and a female officer, and the Hollywood "think" piece comes apart like wet Kleenex.) The same virtue is apparent throughout the wonderful *Queen of Diamonds* and includes the characters' small talk as well as their more dramatic exchanges.

It might be said that violence pervades and infects everything we see and hear in the film, but violence in the usual Hollywood sense is neither seen nor heard. What the movie offers, quite simply, is a vision of hell that corresponds quite closely to American life today.

The Bloody Child, which is subtitled *An Interior of Violence*, taps into something central and irreducible about the pervasive role of violence in contemporary American culture that no other picture gets at—something at once chilling and clarifying, and only purified by the movie's compulsive, purposeful repetitions. The Menkes sisters have allowed us to look into an abyss.

--excerpted from Jonathan Rosenbaum's feature story on THE BLOODY CHILD.

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A MUST SEE!

