

compiled by Andrew O. Thompson



Left: Shot of a transport ship taken from Wadi-Halfa in northern Sudan. (Actual 16mm film clip.) Immediately below: Clad in a harlequin suit, the Marine Captain (Tinka Menkes) seeks solace in a dream sequence. Bottom: The Captain communes with a Sudanese child and a Greek Orthodox priest during her reverie.



Photos by Nina Menkes.

The Birth of Nina Menkes' *The Bloody Child*

In the summer of 1982, I received a small grant to shoot a series of black-and-white stills of the Ethiopian Falasha Jews who were then interned in refugees camps in Sudan. The grant barely covered the cost of my airfare, but the story of these African Jews was so intriguing that I decided to accept; I also thought that it would be a great opportunity to shoot scenes for a rough idea that I had for a fictional movie. The footage from this trip ended up forming an essential part of my latest feature, *The Bloody Child*; this film's narrative is based on an intriguing *Los Angeles Times* article that detailed the arrest of a young U.S. Marines officer, a Gulf War veteran, who had been found digging a grave in the middle of the Mojave desert. The veteran's car was found parked nearby with his wife's bloody body slumped in the backseat.

Accompanying me on the arduous but enlightening African excursion was Tinka Menkes, my sister and collaborator on two prior short films (*A Soft Warrior* and *The Great Sadness of Zohara*). Preparing for this shoot was an exercise in paring down our equipment to



the essentials. Our minuscule budget did not allow for a private vehicle, so we had to rely on public transportation. Therefore, a sync-sound camera plus Nagra were out of the question because of their size, weight and crew requirements. Being more concerned with images than in scenes with dialogue, I decided upon the 16mm Arri-S with three primes on the turret, and one 12-120mm Zeiss zoom lens. On the plane, we carried the camera, lenses and magazine. Our two suitcases, meanwhile, were stuffed with 20 rolls of 16mm raw Kodak reversal stock (13 rolls of ECO ASA 64, and seven rolls of ECO ASA 400), a tripod and body brace, my still photographic equipment, make-up, costumes and, of course, our clothing.

My initial cinematic concept for the African footage was for a fractured female character (played by my sis-

ter) to be positioned within a variety of evocative African milieus; I wanted to connect the West's destructive relationship with Africa to that which the dominant Western culture has to women. All of my images were to be dreamlike and iconic to evoke the *feelings* created inside of us, or more specifically, inside of me, by external political and social realities. For the interiors, I avoided contrast, preferring soft diffused lighting that de-emphasized the detail on the characters' faces. This created a painterly effect that brought out their symbolic qualities.

Given our limitations, carrying lights simply was not feasible. So, in selecting each location, we had to find one that was both visually arresting and naturally lit. Finding amazing locations wasn't hard work, and we ended up shooting a 400' magazine's worth of film at every stop. The journey began in Israel, where we traveled overland across the Sinai desert by Bedouin taxi, then south through Egypt until Aswan by train, down the Nile River and across the Nubian Desert into the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

The most trying moment camera-wise was during our sweltering, jam-packed train ride through the Nubian

desert — people were in seats, in the aisles and on the overhead luggage racks. As the temperature was about 110°, all of the windows were wide open; this caused a mini-Nubian sandstorm to blow about wildly within the carriage. But the landscape we were passing was too spectacular to pass up — I had to have a tracking shot of the desert. To avoid the scattering sand, I loaded the camera on my lap under a scarf. The situation was a bit horrendous, but the shot was worth it and the film came out clean when developed (I had chosen Kodak's reversal stocks as they are less sensitive to specks of dirt and sand than negative films).

Arriving in Khartoum a few days later, I realized that I needed more raw stock. Inquires revealed that the nearest outlet — Dubai, the capital of the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf — wasn't exactly close by. As luck would have it, we discovered a French crew in Khartoum that was conducting a training seminar for budding Sudanese filmmakers. They sold to me what stock they had — Fuji color negative, ASA 64 and 125 daylight. Fortunately, the worst sandstorms were now behind us.

From Khartoum southwards, the only means of getting around was for us to sit on top of cargo trucks transporting both potatoes and onions. Despite the bumpy ride, the relentless heat and constant exposure to direct sunlight, the Arri-S never quit. If it had, we would have been thousands of miles and many weeks away from help. With a week's travel between locations, I had plenty of time to absorb and reflect. Since there was no way to know where the truck would land us, each stop was a discovery, and many suggested a scene that I had yet to figure out.

At each new town or village, Tinka and I would first settle down somewhere (most places had no hotel, hostel or lodging of any kind) and then walk around. A particular building, grove of trees or painted wall would stand out and feel like an exterior representation of one of my internal images. Next, I would think about which aspect of the fractured woman should appear in this particular sequence. Finally, I would recruit locals to appear in the scene. This combination of inner, dream-like images and real, unmanipulated locations is a long-standing characteristic of my work.

Tinka and I spent a total of three months on the road, often sleeping outdoors and going without showers for days on end. Tired and bedraggled, our suitcases bruised and dirty, we arrived at the last leg of our overland journey: the border crossing between Egypt and Israel at El-Arish in Sinai. From there, we continued on to Tel-Aviv, where a plane to America awaited us. Israeli officials were ushering people into two lines — one for Israelis and foreign nationals (primarily European backpacking types) and one for Palestinian refugees. I guess we didn't give off the impression that we were typical Americans; without a second thought, we were waved into the refugee line. After explaining to officials that we were indeed American citizens, we were moved back to the proper line.

Israeli security is very rigorous, and we were worried that the immigration officials might ask us to open a can of exposed film, question the camera in some way, or even confiscate the film. Fortunately, we didn't encounter any problems at this border or any of the other international crossings. Perhaps this was because the Arri-S was in an old black case that didn't look fancy, and everything else was packed into our regular suitcases — we just did not look like a serious film crew! It's also possible that, for once, sexism worked to our advantage, as no one could believe that two young women could be professional filmmakers who should, would or could pay duty. Upon our return to Los Angeles months later, Tinka and I watched the dailies for the first time and were thrilled. The powerful images were disturbing yet beautiful. Unfortunately, they were more like dream fragments than the basis for an entire movie. I put the developed film and workprint into Foto-Kem's film vault and waited.

Nine years and three features later, during the conceptual stages of *The Bloody Child*, Tinka and I realized that our long dormant African footage would add an exciting dimension to the tale of the murderous Marine's arrest by a tough female captain (played by Tinka). By intercutting these images with scenes of the arrest (shot on location at California's Mojave Desert), we could give voice to the Captain's fractured, emotionally damaged "other side," which subconsciously encourages her to find some point of contact with the

African characters.

In order to use the 16mm African footage within *The Bloody Child*, we had to blow it up to 35mm. (Blowing up ECO is better than blowing up negative, because instead of going from 16mm neg to IP or dupe negative, you go straight from the reversal to dupe negative.) The grainy, slightly soft effect produced by the blow-up process created an effective rendering of a complex emotional state, especially when intercut with the fine-grained 35mm military scenes. That these images are as powerful in 1996 as when we originally shot them is a testament to the importance of imagination and feeling over complicated lighting setups and sophisticated equipment.

— Nina Menkes

The Bloody Child will open in Los Angeles on October 24 at Landmark's Nuart Theater, along with a retrospective of the Menkes' earlier work.

Semler's Techniques Add Production Speed

While the craft of cinematography is becoming increasingly complex in many aspects, the projection and shaping of light remains a relatively straightforward prospect. Academy Award-winning director of photography Dean Semler, ACS recently took this truism to heart on the upcoming Warner Bros. picture *Trojan War*, directed by George Huang (*Swimming With Sharks*). Faced with a tight schedule and modest budget, the veteran of such complex films as *The Road Warrior*, *Dances With Wolves* and *Waterworld* devised a deceptively simple lighting solution that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Trojan War is a satiric comedy that trails its protagonist as he crisscrosses Los Angeles in a frantic quest for prophylactics. Nighttime car interiors were the film's primary settings. To save the time that would have been spent rigging lights to insert cars, and to take full advantage of natural luminance, Semler first rated his Kodak EXR 5298 at 1000 ASA — a crucial advantage offered by today's fast, T-grain stocks. However, to quickly and easily add to his base, the cinematographer and his gaffer, Jim Gilson, then ingeniously fashioned and utilized what they later dubbed the "lightbrush" (see diagrams on page 20).

Constructed from a standard