

FILM

# Bewitched

Nina Menkes' Subterranean Voyages

BY SEAN K. SMITH

**N**ina Menkes is the fiercest of the L.A. independents. For some fifteen years, the now 33-year-old filmmaker has been busy crafting an aggressively idiosyncratic body of work. From her UCLA film-school projects to her recent features, Menkes' oeuvre is marked by visual experimentation and searing feminist social critique. Exercises in intimate self-depiction, her films are also records of her purposeful descent into the hidden recesses of her psyche. As in the fairy tale, they're breadcrumbs scattered through the dark woods to show us where she's been.

Yet Menkes has not been toiling away in obscurity. Her latest project, *The Bloody Child*, is Menkes' second feature to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, and this week the film receives its Los Angeles debut at the American Cinematheque as part of their "Alternative Screen" film series. With four critically acclaimed films under her belt, it's clear that Menkes is the local independent film community's worst-kept secret.

Sitting in a Vietnamese noodle shop prior to her USC Film School class (Menkes has been teaching there for over five years), the filmmaker speaks of her often difficult work with intelligence and a wide streak of self-deprecating humor. She wears her politics on her sleeve, but true to her countercultural upbringing (Menkes was a Berkeley-faculty brat in the '70s), she combines it with skepticism and a sense of sheer wonder at the mysteries of the creative process. Dark-haired, she wears sandals, jeans, and a charcoal-gray top, a simple antique silver watch dangling from her wrist. Asian pop wafts from a set of dusty speakers over her head.

Menkes achieved national notoriety of sorts when Janet Maslin mentioned her in a *New York Times* story on this year's Sundance freak show. The filmmaker was papering Park City with posters for *The Bloody Child* which bore the credo "Yes. I am a witch." Maslin interpreted the slogan as just another example of indie kookiness, but Menkes' proclamation was typically forthright, a mixture of defiant feminism and nose-tweaking irony.

"My struggle as a woman and an artist has to be to try to allow myself to be who I am," explains Menkes, sipping from a cup of tea. "That sounds easy but seems to be so hard. People think that it's all postfeminist and everything's fine, but I think that it's not fine. A lot of women are really struggling with the idea of themselves as subjects, not objects, and with power—all the things that you kind of wish were behind us but I don't think are."

"We know that the external structures are all still exist. So instead of being able to say, 'Hi. I'm a person, I want to express myself,' you have to declare yourself a witch to survive. And that in itself is very painful."

So was declaring herself a witch a political act?

Menkes shrugs, looks dubious, and then laughs. "In a way. It's also just for fun. Hey, it got Janet Maslin to write my name in her paper!"

Menkes' fourth film, *The Bloody Child*, is a harrowing anatomy of a murder. Based on the true case of a Marine caught burying his murdered wife outside the base at Twentynine Palms, *The Bloody Child* is a meditation on violence, gender, and power.

Violence, explains Menkes, usually serves as a plot point in films. "It has to do with external events. I was more interested in the inner condition of violence. What is the constellation inside all of the participants that on some level causes



and also results from this violence?

"I'm really not that interested in assigning blame," Menkes continues, "as much as looking at the trap that everyone is in, including the victim, the perpetrator, and the investigator. It's an emotional condition that I think is very American."

in a pond, the murder impinges on everyone and everything it touches. The film is a group portrait of pain and damage, a graphic depiction of what Menkes calls "confused and intricately enmeshed relationships that are fucking up big time."

"In a way," she muses, "it's some kind

**"We went into a world of murder and distortion and confusion and violence. And I think you have to be, on some level, made of steel to go down there without a rope. Otherwise you can just lose it."**

Subtitled *An Interior of Violence*, *The Bloody Child* also examines the psychic echoes of the woman's murder, the shock waves the crime sets off in the lives of a female Marine captain (played by the filmmaker's sister, Tinka Menkes) and her male subordinates.

More than any other of Menkes' films, *The Bloody Child* lays out its human dilemma three-dimensionally. Like ripples

of vision of hell, because the real evil goes unnamed and unrecognized. Everyone's just circulating around this mess."

Menkes makes repeated use of an unsettling central image: an enraged Marine shoves the murderer's face into the bloody remains of his victim, screaming at him, "Do you like that?" The sequence chips away at our composure. It implicates us all; we all feel the murderous rage.

"The idea we wanted was that instead of the violence being an event, it permeated everywhere," explains Menkes, monotonizing with her hands for emphasis. "It's not that there's one moment of violence and then it's contained or resolved. The scene [with the Marine] is all over the film. There's no finishing with it. There's no sense of closure, no sense of resolution. The violence of the murder is all over the place—in the violence between the men, the violence of the captain towards herself, and even the violence of the victim on the psychic level, her confusion and her self-hatred. It's all ricocheting around and has nowhere to go."

Like Menkes' previous projects, *The Bloody Child* is difficult to watch. It takes a lot to shock filmgoers these days, to get them to sit up a little straighter in their seats and pay attention, but a Menkes film can do it. Watching her films can be an intensely frustrating experience. With her unusually long takes and penchant for repetition, audiences are often irritated, then lulled, then irritated again.

But it's by this rollercoaster process that Menkes works her unique and potent magic. The filmmaker understands that audiences must be compelled to abandon their expectations and preconceptions, hangovers after a steady diet of genre flicks. In the middle of a Menkes film, if you let it work its sorcery on you, you feel as if you've never seen a movie before. The images are fresh, the synapses have been restored. In her own words, Menkes' films are "consciousness-altering."

"Somebody said, I think Virginia Woolf, that it's only when a walk is a little too long that everything starts to happen," Menkes suggests. "That's true with meditation. If you get up in the first five minutes, you won't get it."

She holds out her hand and then drops it, once, twice. "It's like boom, then boom. And then if you get down there, you'll have this other thing happen. That's not something that I try to do, but I know that all the films do it. I don't even know how it happens. When I do the films, I work out of a unique place in myself. The film resonates with that space. So if the viewer tunes in, then they—BOOM—they'll match it. They match it and they can go there. It's pretty mystical."

It can be a grueling process, for the audience and for the filmmaker. Menkes explains that the initial cut of *The Bloody Child* was disappointing and credits her sister Tinka with the film's restructuring.

"Tinka has an amazing ability to see the real issues with a kind of x-ray vision. So if I have a talent, it's getting the raw material onto the screen and having that invested pretty deeply with my real feelings. Not my bullshit feelings, not the blab-blabb, but what I really feel. And yet when I get to the editing process, sometimes I'm not able to do that. I'll try to do a cover-up on stuff that I've actually shot. And what Tinka's able to do is to look at it and see my bullshit, so to speak, and say, 'Hey, you are not showing what's really going on there.'"

*The Bloody Child* continues the on-going artistic collaboration between Menkes and her sister Tinka, an actress of stunning abilities who serves as the filmmaker's surrogate, her filmic alter ego. Menkes acknowledges the powerful alchemy that exists between the siblings. "That cathexis between Tinka and me is why the films are so intense," she observes.

Menkes sips her tea thoughtfully. "Our faith in the shooting process is that the real stuff really is there, and that if we

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just find the pattern that's inherent, the life force, the bloodstream of this material, it will come together in an almost uncanny way and make sense and be powerful."

Menkes makes movies the way some people paint, with intuition and daring, qualities noticeably lacking in film today. But the work comes at a high cost. Each project leaves Menkes feeling naked and raw. Exposed, in the truest sense of the word.

"I'm a little bit hesitant to recommend this style of process filmmaking as much as I used to," she confesses, "because I think that getting down into yourself is something that can be

really risky for some people. You can lose your mind if you go down there and aren't strong enough.

"It also depends on where you're going. We went into a world of murder and confusion and violence. And I think you have to be, on some level, made of steel to go down there without a rope. Otherwise you can just lose it."

Menkes finishes her tea.

"I've been working on it for fifteen years. I'm sort of in training for it. Some people work out with their muscles; I work out on these subterranean voyages. I do a lot of things so that I can be able to do this work. Like, I don't socialize a lot, I don't buy furniture! You know what I mean? I hone myself." ■

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