

Film Review

Dissolution (Hitparkut)

(Israel)

A Transfax Film Prods./Lanai Prods./KNR Prods./Menkesfilm presentation. (International sales: Transfax Film Prods., Tel Aviv.) Produced by Marek Rozenbaum, Itai Tamir, Michael Huffington. Executive producers, Rebecca Hartzell. Co-producers, Kevin Ragsdale, Nina Menkes.

Directed, written by Nina Menkes. Camera (B&W, HD), Itay Marom, Menkes; editors, Menkes, Didi Fire; music, Rich Ragsdale; production designer, November Wanderin; costume designer, Aline Lazarov; sound (stereo), Michael Gurevich; sound designer, Menkes; supervising sound editor, Menkes; re-recording mixer, Nathan Ruyle; visual effects supervisor, Tim Caras; visual effects, Comen VFX; associate producer, Wanderin; assistant director, Assaf Banitt. **Reviewed at Jeonju Film Festival, April 30, 2011. (Also in 2010 Jerusalem, Vancouver film festivals.)** Running time: **88 MIN.**

With: Didi Fire, Nadia Tarazi, Filina Klutchkin, Slava Bibergal, Zeynab Muchareb, Farida Tabit, Yohanan Harrison, Shalev Inbar, Shimon Hasson.

By **ROBERT KOEHLER**

A sustained dark night of the soul, Nina Menkes' "Dissolution" plunges into the disturbed mind of a man haunted by his murder of a Tel Aviv pawnbroker. Though not directly adapted from Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," pic takes the novel as its mainspring, with Menkes straying as far from the material as befits her engrossing, visually acute and intensely personal filmmaking. Though gradually building up international critical support, "Dissolution" has been strangely overlooked by many fests. Stateside playdates in Los Angeles and elsewhere are imminent.

Distinguished by an authentically surrealist aesthetic and a fascination with women in extreme emotional states, Menkes' films are sui generis among American independents, yet distinct from what might be facetiously labeled "European" style. While it extends her interest in the mysterious capacities of black-and-white cinematography (on display in her previous film, "Phantom Love"), "Dissolution" represents a break from her previous work by concentrating on a central male character, known only as "Man" (played with unnerving intensity by non-pro Didi Fire, also credited as co-editor and as a contributing writer to Menkes' script). Pic also marks a return to Israel (specifically Yafo, an Arab quarter of Tel Aviv), where the Los

Angeles-based helmer has previously filmed. Fire's man immediately appears menacing, as he rhythmically sharpens a knife in his dingy apartment like a warrior readying for battle. He may only be doing this to cut an especially tough slice of cow's lung he buys in a butcher's shop, an exchange that also suggests this guy is poor and a bit of a trickster. He's weeks behind on his rent, much to the disgust of his stressed-out landlady (Zeynab Muchareb), and whiles away his days either flopped on his bed or hanging out in cafes with a talkative friend (Slava Bibergal). Direct echoes of Dostoevsky appear when the man visits crusty pawnbroker Malka (Filina Klutchkin) and haggles over the price of a supposedly antique watch. During the man's subsequent visit, Menkes' camera remains outside Malka's apartment, effectively eavesdropping on screams and sounds of a struggle. Becoming unhinged, the man pilfers some jewelry from Malka's flat and buries it in a forest glen outside of town. These actions serve as a prelude for the film's fascinating second half, which captures the man's growing isolation and paranoia, with a minimum of dialogue and maximum of beautifully judged elliptical editing. The



Nina Menkes' "Dissolution" follows a murderer, played by Didi Fire, who becomes increasingly paranoid in the Yafo quarter of Tel Aviv.

man is viewed with suspicion by younger Arab men in his immediate block (particularly after a near-fatal domestic incident across the street), some of whom dog him as he wanders home from long, aimless nights in a bar. There, he's ironically befriended by a veteran cop (Yohanan Harrison), who can sense that something's amiss.

Perhaps Menkes' most distinctive cinematic expressions come through in purely visual terms, as with incidents involving creepy insects and snails invading the man's personal space; a dream of a horse being beaten (one of the scenes directly taken from Dostoevsky's novel); and his increasingly strange sightings of the landlady's daughter, Yasmeeen (Nadia Tarazi).

Unlike many of Menkes' films, which emphasize large interior and exterior spaces that function like characters unto themselves, "Dissolution" generates an intensely claustrophobic vibe that can elicit a queasy feeling in the viewer, particularly in many close-ups of meat being chopped and cooked. Unexpectedly, this effect is hand-in-glove with an emphasis on extreme long shots, sometimes from pronounced high angles. Menkes' co-lensers Itay Marom and production designer November Wanderin make outstanding contributions.

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