

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Queen of Diamonds' Review: Fear, Loathing and Misogyny

Queen of Diamonds | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Nina Menkes | Drama | 1h 17m

By **Glenn Kenny**

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The writer David Foster Wallace called Las Vegas “a city that pretends to be nothing but what it is, an enormous machine of exchange.” “Queen of Diamonds,” a 1991 film by Nina Menkes set in Vegas now debuting in a new restoration, is, among other things, an urgent portrayal of the tedium of endless transaction.

In one of the movie’s central sequences, the protagonist, Firdaus (her name, derived from the Arabic word for “paradise,” is only said once in the movie), played by the filmmaker’s sister Tinka Menkes, plies her trade as a low-stakes blackjack dealer.

Firdaus’s face is powdered so white one might mistake her for a Goth aficionado; that face stays impassive as she pulls cards from a shoe, slides them to players, turns over her own, pushes bills into a slot with a clear plastic plunger, gives out chips, takes them away. The players are nearly as limited in their movements and displayed emotions as she is. The clanging of fruit machines and the electronic whoops of video poker games drown out the piped-in music. This is not the furious gambling action of so many Vegas-set movies. Nobody’s blowing on anyone’s dice. It’s a minimal-mobility death dance.

Menkes’s highly controlled cinematic style suits the dance well. She sets up ungainly and awkward scenes with a compositional eye that’s almost classical. Camera movements of any kind are so rare that when a zoom occurs, you snap to a different kind of attention.

Firdaus also serves as a caregiver for an old man; the other people in her sphere include a missing husband, a boisterous best friend and a neighbor who regularly beats the woman with whom he lives. The quotidian elements of this life are depicted as cold horrors, sometimes interrupted with wondrous, unsettling sights, such as a tree on fire, vigorously burning. Any spiritual or religious connotation here is left in the lap of the viewer.

No matter how much of the unconscious, or of the subconscious, is injected into the movie's images and sound, nothing here is aestheticized. This is not a "dreamy" film. Its moments of disconnect from "ordinary" reality, as when a character holds up a hand to show a long set of fresh and spiky-looking sutures on her wrist, are meant to provoke — specifically, in a way that's anticapitalist and feminist. Even at a terse 76 minutes, "Queen of Diamonds" is not an easy film. But it's an essential one.

Queen of Diamonds NYT Critic's Pick

Director Nina Menkes

Writer Nina Menkes

Stars Emmelda Beech, Tinka Menkes

Running Time 1h 17m

Genre Drama

Queen of Diamonds

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 17 minutes.

