

News Business Opinion Education Entertainment Lifestyle Sports Obits



Subscribe

'Queen of Diamonds' hits the jackpot



SLIDE 1 OF 2

The filmmaker's sister, Tinka Menkes, stars in 'Queen of Diamonds.'



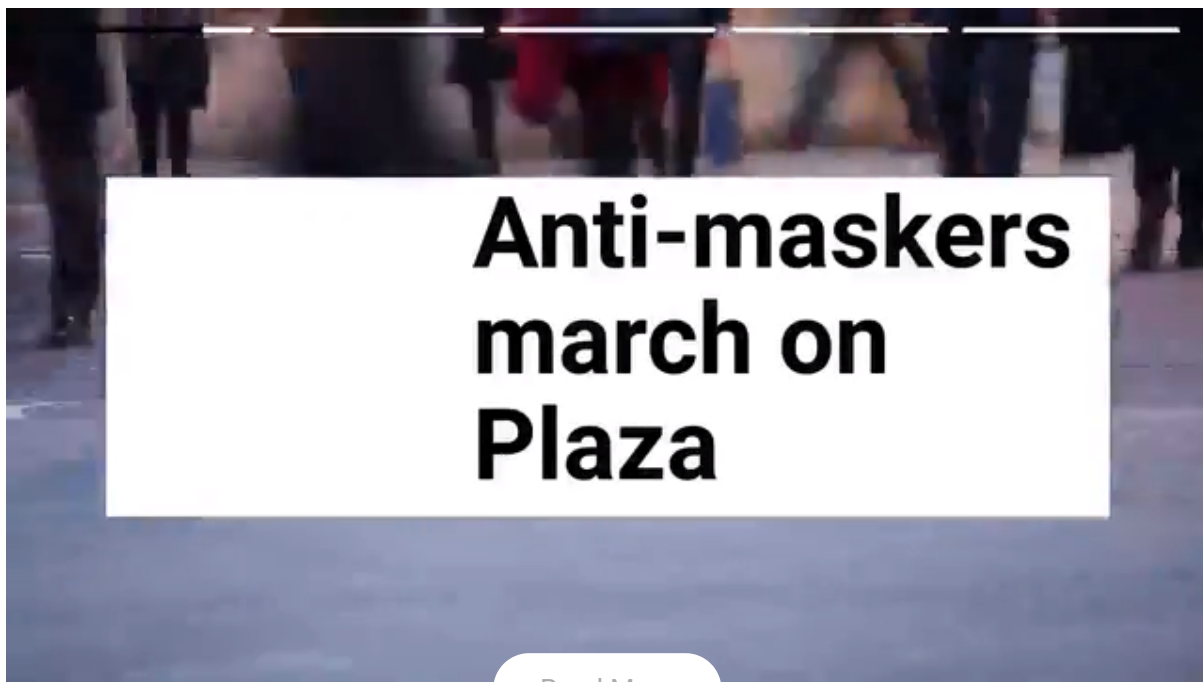
Please exit Incognito Mode.

EXPAND

April 1, 2021



If you're interested in hard and glittering objects, try out "Queen of Diamonds," the most unusual 1991 gem from filmmaker Nina Menkes. The filmmaker's sister, Tinka Menkes, stars as a card-dealing cipher referred to once by the name "Firdaus," who works a blackjack table in white cake makeup and ghosts around the outskirts of Las Vegas alone. She lives on Sahara Avenue just off the Strip, wallowing in a cheaply fixtured apartment with the odd, awkwardly decadent flourish, like a large jeweled mirror perched above her tiny sink.



Throughout, Menkes favors wide establishing shots of unglamorous places like the Par-a-dice Motel where our heroine cares rather impassively for a dying man. It's a film full of

Please exit Incognito Mode.

EXPAND

vista at an oasis lake resort gone to seed. Moment to moment we might be confronted with a long shot of a palm tree burning up, or three elephants eating straw off the asphalt behind a casino.

About halfway through the film, we finally see Firdaus at work dealing blackjack. We don't get any thrills of wins and losses but instead the rather mundane transactions of capitalism. Cards come out of the shoe, chips are taken and given back. The lengthy sequence cuts back and forth between the same table at different times, emphasizing the accumulated fatigue of a day's work. There's the sound of a ticking clock, the tinkle of slot machine jingles, the clatter of quarters hitting metal, and plenty of tinny country music. It all feels like a headache that Firdaus silently endures like a mime actor.

Perhaps it's because she never has anyone specific to talk to — put another way, no one in the credits is listed with a character name. We do sort of get to know the violent man who assaults his fiancée on the other side of the paper-thin wall to Firdaus's apartment. And, in the most plot-driving moment in the film, an unnamed friend asks, "Where's your husband?" to which our heroine nonchalantly replies, "On a trip." After it comes out that he's been gone three months, Firdaus considers but does not actually make a missing person report at the police station.

Nina Menkes directed, wrote, shot, produced and co-edited this radical, worthwhile film that improbably arrives at some arid intersection between the film works of Chantal Ackerman and David Lynch. In the end, Menkes offers a sardonic parody of a classic ending at small white wedding where the bride wears bruises and nibbles cake in front of scruffy guests wearing shorts and, often, no shirts. At least there's an Elvis impersonator. As usual, Firdaus implacably gazes past all the mundanity before careening down some lost highway.

Now showing

"Queen of Diamonds" is streaming on the Criterion Channel. Not rated. Running time 1:17. Visit criterionchannel.com.

Queen of Diamonds Trailer