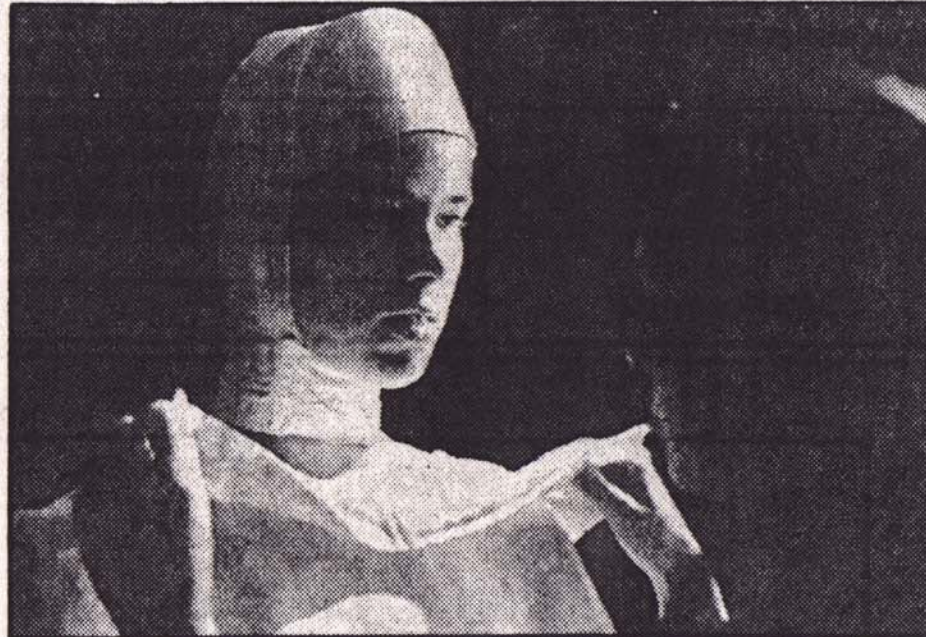


Filmmaker experiments with sex and religion

By David Ehrenstein
Herald Examiner staff writer

With "Damned If You Don't," Su Friedrich strengthens her reputation as one of the most promising talents on the current experimental film scene. Terse, direct and eloquent, this quasi-narrative film essay about women, religion, sexuality and convent life, is certain to shock the literal-minded in general and conservative Catholics in particular. But if you're curious about recent feminist debates about women's sexuality or just in an adventurous frame of moviegoing mind, you should find this brief work to be well worth your attention.

Filmed in crisp, stark black and white, "Damned If You Don't" begins with a dissection of the Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger film "Black Narcis-



Taking "Black Narcissus" a step beyond, Peggy Healey, left, and Ela Troyano star in Su Friedrich's "Damned If You Don't."

sus." If you're familiar with that romantic drama about a group of British nuns trying to establish a convent in the Himalayas, then you can appreciate Friedrich's interest in it. Released in 1948, "Black Narcissus" was very daring for its time in suggesting the way certain aspects of religion are intertwined with sexual needs.

Friedrich shows highlights from the film in short video clips, while a narrator supplies an off-screen synopsis, detailing the con-

flict between that film's "good nun" and "bad nun" and the way in which the latter became a "bad woman" because of her desire for "the man" in the story. Going Powell and Pressburger one better, Friedrich underscores the latent sexual attraction between the two nuns that those filmmakers only hinted at.

"Damned If You Don't" next moves to a drama segment. The camera follows a young novice (Peggy Healey) as she moves about within convent walls and on

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T, written, produced, and directed by Su Friedrich. Not rated. At Filmforum, tonight only.

The Nun Peggy Healey
The Woman..... Ela Troyano

city streets. Her pious figure is contrasted with that of a free-wheeling young woman artist (Ela Troyano). As the two women repeatedly pass by one another in a series of different settings, a sexual attraction between them is hinted at. All the while, the narration drives this point home with readings from the memoirs of medieval nuns and fragmentary documentary reminiscences of various — unseen — women about their Catholic upbringing.

This is plainly volatile material, but Friedrich handles it all with great care. She isn't interested in mindless sensationalism, nor is she out to take a few cheap shots at the Catholic church. Like a good lawyer, she's simply assembled her evidence about sexuality and religion and has allowed the facts to speak for themselves.

"Damned If You Don't" will be shown tonight at 8 p.m. with another Friedrich film, "Gently Down the Stream." Filmforum is located at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), 1804 Industrial St. For further information, call 276-7452 or (714) 923-2441.