

Experimental Bent

BY AMY TAUBIN

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T by Su Friedrich and **THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE** by the Sankofa collective. In the First Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, opening September 15, Millennium Film Workshop.

Just when it seemed as if half the avant-garde filmmakers born post-1948 were putting on the brakes, subjecting every creative choice to some sort of will-this-prevent-my-film-from-maybe-getting-shown-at-the-Waverly gauge, along comes Su Friedrich's sweetly passionate, genuinely innovative *Damned If You Don't* to make a case for *not* following the well-worn narrative trail.

Friedrich opens with two sequences so pointedly *unprofessional* as to make any distributor looking for potential cross-overs turn off the projector within three minutes. In the first, a nun is talking to a kid in the street, but since the film begins in silence, we can't hear what she's saying (shades of that old home-movie look). In the second, a woman is watching Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* on TV. Because Friedrich hasn't used the kind of high tech equipment necessary to keep the TV image synced to her film camera, black bands stroll up the screen in erratic rhythms. The point is that Friedrich isn't merely settling for these degraded images; they suit her meaning better than conventionally transparent ones. *Damned If You Don't* is a meditation on lesbian sexuality in relation to a community of women—Catholic nuns—in which desire is all the more compelling for being bound and silenced.

The film weaves four basic elements—*Black Narcissus* footage, spoken excerpts from the text *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, ex-

pressive imagery of waterfowl in a zoo and whales in an aquarium tank, and fragments of a fantasized erotic encounter between a nun and a woman artist—into a 43-minute lyrical evocation of the mystery of memory and the development of sexual identity.

Damned If You Don't is paired on the opening night of the Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival with *The Passion of Remembrance* by Sankofa, a black, British film collective funded by Channel Four Television. It's difficult to imagine a film that would be more opposed in its methods to Friedrich's and still fall into the category of avant-garde or experimental. *The Passion of Remembrance* exemplifies the theoretical talkie, a genre that dominated British filmmaking in the '70s and influenced even such



Lesbian nuns: desire, bound and silenced

nondidactic filmmakers as Friedrich herself.

But if Friedrich's film brings the half-hidden, barely audible, and inchoate to light, the theoretical talkie takes a well-formed and almost always political thesis and illustrates it with talking pictures. Where traditional political filmmaking made either/or choices about fiction and documentary, *Passion of Remembrance* combines acted scenes with documentary footage and even bits of expressionist poetic drama. More ambitious than successful in filmmaking terms, the real strength of the film is in its subject matter—the realization by black women and black gay men that they must, at the risk of divisiveness, challenge the male heterosexual hegemony that is crippling their movement. ■