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Burning: *Flame's* Myriam Mézières

# 9½ Semaines

BY JULIE PHILLIPS

**A FLAME IN MY HEART.** Directed by Alain Tanner. Written by Myriam Mézières. Produced by Paulo Branco. Distributed by Roxie Releasing. At the Bleecker.

**F**or a film about obsession, *A Flame in My Heart* is remarkably noncommittal. About the loves of a sensual, enigmatic actress named Mercedes (Myriam Mézières), it's full of nakedness and graphic sex and declarations of love—all of which it leaves hanging in the air. Mercedes rehearses Racine's *Bérénice*; while she's declaiming words of undying love, she's also trying to figure out how to lose her pesky, overly passionate ex-lover Johnny (Aziz Kabouche). Johnny breaks in through her skylight and she falls back into bed with him. He ambushes her at the theater; she moves to a hotel.

Then she picks up a new man on the Métro, a journalist named Pierre (Benoît Régent). He is thin-lipped, detached, rational; out of relief or habit or curiosity, she falls as hard for him as Johnny did for her. When Pierre leaves town on assignment, she becomes despondent. She hangs around the house eating corn flakes out of the box and masturbating with the TV on. Unable to say her lines, she loses her part as *Bérénice* and gets a temp job as an exotic dancer. Eventually Pierre takes her to Cairo, where as aimlessly as they got together they drift apart.

It's not clear what, if any, conclusions we are meant to draw from this. Filmed in grainy black and white, *A Flame in My Heart* is distanced and dispassionate, as empty in some ways as *9½ Weeks*, but without the ice cubes and the strawberries. (Realistic sex is more alienating than Hollywood sex: It's hard to identify with someone who's obviously having an orgasm when you're not.) More interesting than emotionally involving, it leaves a lot of room for speculation. Whatever's on your mind about relationships, you can probably read it in here.

Mézières wrote the scenario and dominates the film; although her wide-lipped, narcissistic Mercedes is fascinating, in a way, to watch, she offers no clue as to motive. She's so deliberate in pursuit of her randomly chosen objects of desire (and so careful to reach orgasm every time) that, far from actually being possessed by love, she seems to be conducting relationship experiments. But who knows? Director Alain Tanner is saying in interviews that the film represents a move away from ideology and toward the emotional and physical; instead, he seems to have ended up with a kind of psychological relativism, which some people will find fabulously meaningful and others self-indulgent. Take your pick. ■