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Rich Gerbl

The Rape of the Sabine Women This film by Eve Sussman has its United States premiere tonight at the IFC Center.

Present at an Empire's Corrupted Birth

Like the Neo-Classical history paintings on which it is based, Eve Sussman's film "The Rape of the Sabine Women" never lets you forget that it is serious art. Extravagantly

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beautiful, endlessly noble and largely devoid of humor, it self-consciously pushes every aspect of movie-making toward sensorial overload. Made by Ms. Sussman and the Rufus Corporation, this dialogue-free work, which could be called a video-opera, is to have its United States premiere tonight at a sold-out screening at the IFC Center in Greenwich Village. But the public-

art organization Creative Time is presenting free public screenings there tomorrow through Tuesday — at 2, 6 and 9:45 p.m. — to coincide with the annual Armory Show art fair this weekend.

"The Rape of the Sabine Women" is dense, lavish and drawn out. It is larded with art historical references, startling juxtapositions and brilliant camera work and enriched by the faces, bodies, movements and general sexiness of a tribe of handsome young actors. Intricately edited, it jumps back and forth in time and alternates between color and black-and-white scenes, sharp and grainy definition, slow-motion and normal

speed. Cinematic space deepens and then flattens. We see the actors in character, but also in their dressing rooms; we also glimpse cameras, crews and the musicians.

Most notably, all dialogue is replaced by an amazing original score by Jonathan Bepler. He worked with a host of musicians and singers, who sometimes improvised during filming. The heady weaving of sound and image is the work's greatest strength.

The total experience of watching and listening to this extraordinary yet ponderous meditation on love,

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Present, Artfully, at the Corrupted Birth of an Empire

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community and the senselessness of war is like eating a chocolate chip cookie made of nothing but the chips. There's so much to savor that you may start hankering for a clear, cool glass of water.

Shot in Berlin, in Athens and on the Greek island of Hydra, the movie is an avant-garde costume drama in five acts. Its story is a variation on the ancient myth of the Sabine women, who after being abducted, raped and forced into marriage by Roman warriors, wade into a pitched battle between their husbands and their Sabine relatives to secure peace and the future of Western civilization.

The movie's heroics and pageantry are inspired by the Sabine paintings of Poussin, Rubens and David — especially David's "Intervention of the Sabine Women" of 1799. But Ms. Sussman's "Sabine Women" is set in the endlessly stylish, initially optimistic 1960s.

The Roman warriors are trim young men in shiny suits with narrow lapels; they evoke the secret-agent chic of James Bond but also the deadening conformity of Sloan Wilson's novel "The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit." The women wear French twists, richly patterned mod dresses and big dark glasses that recall those of Jacqueline Kennedy and Maria Callas, rivals in the late '60s for the affections of Aristotle Onassis.

The story begins after Romulus

Free screenings will be shown tomorrow through Tuesday at IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 924-7771 or ifccenter.com.

and his warriors establish Rome and realize that they must find mates and procreate if this city on the Tiber is to endure. Diplomacy fails; abduction is the only option. A sports festival — to which the inhabitants of surrounding cities are invited — is the trap.

For womenless Rome, Ms. Sussman substitutes the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, shot in glamorous black and white to the sounds of walking, coughs and murmurs. It is as if we were in the Roman Forum when the Senate was in session. A few young men orbit a statue of an enthroned emperor and eye a stone Greek goddess. An old museum guard, played by Nesbitt Blaisdell, one of the founders of the Rufus Corporation, looks on; he appears as an

onlooker in every act, like the stage manager in "Our Town."

Next, larger numbers of young men muster at Berlin's International Style airport, Tempelhof — pacing, smoking, sitting, sometimes unfolding their newspapers or crossing their legs in Pinã Bauschian unison. They shift into action, leaving the building; in one of the movie's most striking shots, a lone warrior glides out through the stillness on a moving escalator ramp.

The spaciousness and order of these black-and-white scenes is countered by the crowded picture plane and dense color of the abduction scene, which Ms. Sussman sets in the thronged meat market of Athens. Recast as the butchers' daughters, the



Eve Sussman's "Rape of the Sabine Women" includes scenes at a beach

Sabine women hawk their fathers' wares with fabulously shrill, rhythmic cries and are whisked away one by one. A demure rape scene is enacted in a decaying room hung with a string of dead hare and fowl — a Chardin-like still life to which the camera lovingly returns at least twice too often.

Married life is recast as a party in a '60s beach house on Hydra, shot in scorching color and filled with the artificiality and posing of an extended fashion shoot. In another moment of eye-catching stillness, a woman floats across the pool in an inner tube, fully clothed. The gathering starts in the afternoon with numerous children and, stretching into the night, includes a beautifully acted lovers' tri-

angle. Tension mounts, and the house begins to feel like a fort under siege.

The final scene shows the Herodion Theater in Athens, a Greek amphitheater shot mostly from above as it fills with large groups of people. Some, led by conductors, seem to form choruses. Others sit, stand, walk to and fro. The action and the camera shift to the bottom of the amphitheater, where the young men gather and start slowly to struggle. The young women, familiar from the meat market and the beach house scenes, descend through the crowd and join in. Clothes are torn, bodies are bared. The dust rises.

Despite their utopian veneer, the 1960s were arguably the beginning of the situation in which the world now finds itself. So it is not surprising that in Ms. Sussman's version of the Sabine myth, everyone simply fights to the death, albeit in a stagey, slow-mo-

tion, painterly way. Ms. Sussman has recast the birth of a society as destruction.

Artistically, the film is an intriguing summation of the worldliness that began to enrich art in the late 1970s. While using Classical, Neo-Classical and International Style elements, it also draws expertly on 30 years of avant-garde appropriation and formalist self-reference. Its scenes may recall the cosmopolitan performances of Robert Wilson and Ms. Bausch; the photo-based art of Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, Robert Longo and Philip-Lorca Dicorcia; and the historicizing lushness of Neo-Expressionist painters like Julian Schnabel and David Salle, as well as the filmmaker-sculptor Matthew Barney.

Ms. Sussman has come a long way from her solo debut at the Bronwyn Keenan Gallery in SoHo in 1997, where she showed funky, live-feed video broadcasts of pigeons roosting in the building's airshaft. By 2004, she had replaced Discovery Channel Post-Minimalism with Masterpiece Theater grandeur in "89 Seconds at Alcazar," a mesmerizing 10-minute video projection that wended its way through what appeared to be a modeling session for Velázquez's elaborate painting "Las Meninas."

Fraught with whispered exchanges, rustling silks and discreet gestures, this piece became the breakout hit of the 2004 Whitney Biennial. And it put Ms. Sussman on the map, along with her collaborators, the group of improv-savvy actors, musicians and dancers that is the Rufus Corporation.

While "89 Seconds at Alcazar" grew from a projected 89-second time frame to fill 10 minutes with fly-on-the-wall tension, the 80-minute "Sabine Women" stretches its beauty before us with overindulged, seductive, feline opulence.



Photographs by Benedikt Partenheimer

house on the Greek island of Hydra, left, and at Berlin's Tempelhof airport.