

**KEITH GAREBIAN – STAGE AND PAGE WEBSITE**

**SISTER SMILE**

**(SUOR SORRISO)**

**Directed by Roger Deutsch**

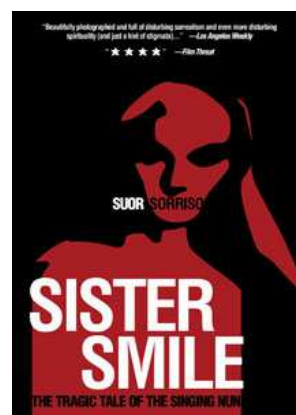
**Color, 95 min, DVD**

**\$16.95**

**Available through Music Video Distributors (MVD)**



Late in Roger Deutsch's dark take on the unfortunate life of the singing nun who won international celebrity in 1963 for her cheerful single "Dominique," there are references to the awful blandness and falsities of the 1966 Hollywood version of her life. One is through a poster of the film that starred Debbie Reynolds. Another is a scene from the same film as shown on television. This is Deutsch's way of mocking the fairy tale myth of Jeanine



Deckers, the Belgian nun of the Dominican order, whose short-lived career as a singer was overshadowed by her loss of religious faith and her descent into drug addiction, lesbian indulgence, and suicide. Deutsch's film begins like a fairy tale itself before sabotaging the viewer's expectations. It shows the young woman fleeing her oppressive family by stealthily descending a balcony in shadows, then buying a guitar that she nicknames Adele, finding and stopping by a large red rose in a field that she addresses with a sort of naïve romantic fervour, and then making her way to a convent gate where she prays to God to make something worthy of her life. But this succession of positive feelings is soon countered by a nightmare sequence in which she feels she is harrowed by devils while sinking into oozing mud. Deutsch's version appears to favour checks more than balances, for even though he returns briefly to a sugary, sentimental treatment of her singing career with scenes of joyously skipping postulants and fans, it is not long before he abandons the fairy tale aspect in favour of an overwhelmingly sordid narrative.

His film was originally released in 2002, and was shown at several international film festivals. But it came six years after an unsuccessful off-Broadway play based on Sister Smile, four years before an equally unsuccessful musical based on that very play, and seven years prior to Stijn Coninx's much-lauded film version of the life of the singing nun. So, his film is chronologically betwixt and between. Co-written by Deutsch and Francesca Terrenato, it is a speculative biography that imagines the nun's life rather than restricting itself to documentary facts. The filmmaker does get some of the facts correctly, especially the invidious influence of religiosity on a young person's psyche and the voracious grasping nature of the Church when it comes to money churned out by the nun's success as a recording artist. Sister Smile was virtually penniless when she left the Dominican order, and one scene depicts her sleeping on a park bench. However, the young woman's family situation boils down to her strange father who often seems like a character imagined out of a Fellini film. Deutsch shows us a young woman who had reputedly shown talent for painting, acting, and singing, one who becomes a nun only to leave the convent abruptly before taking her final vows. She runs a shelter for wayward girls, where she falls in love with another ex-nun, only to discover a path of self-destruction. Drugs and sex become her fatal cravings. The story becomes, in effect, a journey into hell rather than a story of redemption—which is not a criticism in itself. However, Deutsch's mixture of tones is very much a mixture of assets and flaws.

The film's self-reflexive structure is a strength as the story exercises its conflicting themes (reality and dream, faith and doubt, perdition and redemption), but its surrealism, though

sometimes rich in visual poetry, is marred by poor editing that is jarringly staccato and often irritatingly abrupt. Scenes seem to be lopped off in mid-rhythm, and transitions occur jerkily. Moreover, the terse episodic nature of the film prevents proper development of themes or an overall consistency of style. The nun's story plays at times like something out of one of Fellini's dream films, and sometimes the main character becomes a parody of a tormented saint. The eclectic soundtrack (opera, rap, pop) adds to the problem.



Deutsch moves among several styles: fairy tale, docudrama, visionary dream, and melodrama. His decision to film the story in Italian with English subtitles is bold, but the Italian gives the film an earthiness that is much too raw or an operatic hysteria that is hardly Belgian in tone—especially in the strong performance of Ginevra Colonna in the title role. Nor is there much that is genuinely spiritual about the film, for the point about the protagonist's difficulty of resolving her internal conflicts between the sacred and the profane is swamped by an over-indulgence in the sordid. The colour red is isolated early in the wild rose scene, and it is then emphasized in steamy scenes of bacchanalian sex and the blood stains in a dream sequence. But red also speaks to the director's penchant for flagrant melodrama. Nevertheless, *Sister Smile* justifies itself by wiping the false smile off the face of the pious icon concocted by the Catholic Church before Jeanine Deckers's loss of faith.

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