



Life on the Big Screen

By Pat Aufderheide

The billboards all over Havana said "First New Latin American Film Festival!" And more than 500 of us, from 34 countries, were there with festival badges on to prove it.

Caught between an urge to run out to a beach party, see a movie or to pop into a local factory, we all—groping for common languages between native speakers of Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Russian, Bulgarian, Polish and Tamil—poured into the same grandiosely decaying hotel.

The Cubans had invited us there to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Cuban film institute, Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) and to honor the third thriving decade of New Latin American Film, a.k.a. Nuevo Cine. Nuevo Cine refers to films by Latins made with social or political intent. The celebration had a triple purpose—to see films, to make contacts and to set up a marketplace for the films.

The Cubans awarded prizes, "Corals," and the festival jury included Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Regis Debray as well as Latin American filmmakers. The Cubans hope the festival becomes an annual event, with the marketplace (known as MECLA) a permanent feature.

Getting together the people who make Nuevo Cine films was no small feat. In most of Latin America you can get strung up by the thumbs for talking of social change, much less making a movie about it. Much of the last 25 years of work in Nuevo Cine has been done in secret, in exile or in disguise.

Anger and insight.

In the late '60s and early '70s films with social themes from Latin America seemed to many of us a kind of miracle, both technically and politically. They promised anger and insight, a populist recovery of the film medium, especially in an era when many young American leftists sought their heroes in the Third World.

By the late '50s, after an early history of national filmmaking that had ended decisively with Hollywood's conquering of international distribution channels, only two Latin American film industries were still alive. In Mexico and Brazil smudgy caricatures of Hollywood entertainment were churned out for local audiences already jaded by the real thing.

Meanwhile film buffs in Latin America's big cities saw in Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave ways to use film to express their own cultural and national concerns.

With the Cuban revolution, ICAIC was founded and began producing a vigorous series of documentaries. Accompanying production went a program of distribution and exhibition via truck and mule to places where no film—and sometimes no automobile—had ever gone.

Meanwhile Brazilian directors began producing films that tapped Brazilian peasant and African folklore. Glauber Rocha's cockeyed operatic westerns—*Antonio das Mortes* was the wildest—piqued international curiosity.

In Bolivia a film group, UKAMAU, sneaked around government censorship to make films about highland peasants' and miners' battles to survive and then carried projectors and films to villages to show the films.

The end of the '60s, after a meeting of leftist filmmakers at Vina del Mar, Chile, brought a starburst of important films. *Hour of the Furnaces*, a staccato indictment of Argentine politics, was made then, and so was the Chilean drama recounting the true story of a homeless, jobless man who killed the family that took him in—*The Jackal of Nahualtero*. Soon a national Chilean film institute was formed. In Cuba, *Lucia* was made, putting Cuba on the international art circuit map.

New Latin American cinema of that era—always culturally diverse—experimented with different ways to use film to communicate social concerns. Some used verite techniques garnered in documentary work, and also the intercutting of fiction and documentary footage. Some used an operatic style and allegory. Some used statistics and interpolated narration to break the empathic trance of the viewer and to give more information on the problem addressed. Some used humor, parody and irony to comment not only on social problems but the romantic forms of movie entertainment.

And then in the '70s the political curtain came down. Jorge Sanjines of the Ukamau group had to leave Bolivia, and Uruguayan filmmakers went into exile. Already by 1968 a Brazilian coup-within-a-coup had firmly quashed freedom of expression. With Pinochet came the end of the Chilean film institute.

Films went on being made, though, and the political situation in some countries, notably Brazil in the later '70s—loosened up ever so slightly. But international film fest attention had drifted away from the Nuevo Cine and all its vaunted energy and anger.

Reunions.

So the emotional outbursts and embraces in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional between filmmakers and friends had a special meaning. Here were people whose work is often difficult to see in its own country, who work out of contact with colleagues, who lack information because of censorship and who suffer a kind of media brown out.

Mexican filmmaker Berta Navarro explained "We understand that it means something to be Latin American, that as filmmakers we have the responsibility to rescue our culture. But as things are now, I have no idea of what a friend in Colombia, what a comrade in Bolivia or Peru is working on."

ICAIC production head Jorge Fraga

On the Beach

The New Wave of Latin American Film Hits Havana.



A Cuban film crew interviews Coral winner Geraldo Sarno at Jibacoa beach.

said "We have good contact with some Latin American countries—Mexico, Venezuela, Panama. But there are many other countries—Haiti, Ecuador, El Salvador, where it is very difficult to know what is going on. And we have to know, because this movement is just going to keep on growing."

It could be frustrating to try to hold discussions in the frenetic atmosphere in which people ran from film to film, disappearing just as you were about to finish a sentence. U.S. filmmaker Barbara Kopple shared the feeling of several who noted the lack of structured discussion by the audience after films. There were a few formal discussions, including one on international mass communications that included speeches by U.S. communications expert Herbert Schiller and European scholars Michele and Armand Matelart. Out of the scattered discussions of this conference, however, will be coming—if former meetings are any guide—a new starburst of creative filmmaking.

Day after day, for nine days and scores upon scores of films, came the in-the-can proof that Nuevo Cine hadn't disap-

peared with the '60s. Rather, in spite of all the obstacles, a process of maturing is taking place.

Several film industries brought more varied and more sophisticated work than ever before—especially the Brazilian and the Venezuelan. The prevalence of color films was proof of increased technical capacity. The variety of subjects—ranging from terrorism to education to baseball—was proof of healthy diversity, as was the variety of approaches, which ranged from Godardian experimentation to traditional westerns.

Chicano filmmakers, who were honored in a special tribute, demonstrated, as did Panamanian filmmakers, the existence of a creative group with solid filmmaking experience. The first Haitian-made feature, a documentary chronology of Haitian history, was shown.

The long-awaited third part of *The Battle of Chile*, a Cuban-Chilean production begun in 1973, premiered. This concludes the now four-and-a-half hour long epic on the rise and fall of Allende's Chile, with its interviews with union officials, workers and housewives as well as its hard-edged analysis of rightwing

Left to right: Haiti, the Way of Freedom; Puerto Rico; Portrait of Teresa; One Way or Another; The Other Francisco.



sabotage and takeover. The first two parts have received universal international praise. Unfortunately the third part adds little to the strength of the first two and suffers by having a short film's worth of interesting interviews be dragged out to 90 minutes to fit a format.

Inevitably, *The Battle of Chile* wasn't the only disappointment. The film festival's director Pastor Vega asked people to bring whatever films they wanted to. With no prior selection, the festival gave a warts-and-all look at the state of the art. And if some of the films were amateurish, some graceless and some silly, that was not surprising. Take a look at any film school's products for contrast.

No, what was surprising was the vitality of films with social themes, in spite of the power of commercial cinema. Most impressive was the example of Cuba, which showed what you can do if you have your own national studio and grow up in it.

Artistic freedom.

Cuban features demonstrated the degree of artistic leeway possible in ICAIC, at least among its veterans. Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Survivors* looks like a macabre hybrid of Bunuel and Harold Lloyd, showing a bourgeois family that shuts the gates of their large estate to the revolution and moves backward in civilization through feudalism to barbarity. Enrique Pinoda's *Aquella Larga Noche* tells the true story of two women in the clandestine movement in 1958. It uses a complicated mix of flashback, documentary-like sequences and a multilevel soundtrack to give a subjective sense of pre-revolutionary leftist work. Humberto Solas' *Cantata de Chile* is a long visual poem celebrating the heroism of the Chilean people.

Documentary work continues to be a major strength of the Cuban film industry. New filmmakers train by making shorts (Cuba has no film school) and every feature is accompanied by an ICAIC newsreel and short documentary.

On the opening night of the festival two very simple, powerful documentary shorts premiered. Both were directed by award-winning Benabe Hernandez, who before the revolution was a bank clerk and has now made dozens of films. Both were interviews with Sandinista guerrilla children. Especially moving was *La Infancia de Marisol*, in which a young woman describes with quiet force why she fought, how poorly armed they were, how she was captured and raped and how she lost her family.

In all the diversity of Cuban film there is still little work by women (as was typical in the festival generally). Four years ago ICAIC took in some 30 new trainees and 28 of them were women. But as yet only one short film, *Lactancia* by Marisol Trujillo, is evidence of that "new wave."

Co-operation.

Producing and distributing Cuban films is only a part of ICAIC's work. Its facilities are rented to filmmakers from other countries for post-production and in some cases donated for solidarity, as in the case of *The Battle of Chile*.

ICAIC filmmakers also share their expertise. Presently a documentary on the Nicaraguan revolution is underway at ICAIC, with Mexican, Nicaraguan and Cuba collaborators.

Much heralded at the festival was the

brand new Nicaraguan Incine, a film institute that lacks, as Fraga says, "everything." Nicaraguans are training at ICAIC and Cubans are also donating equipment. Also present at the festival were representatives from the Angolan national film institute and from Mozambique, whose institute concentrates (like the early Cuban institute did) on documentaries and on expanding the film audience.

Torture and folklore.

The advantage of having a revolution in progress was clear at the festival. Where other films often focussed on horror stories of what must be changed—for instance the moving but depressing Chilean

Continued on page 14.

The View from Hollywood

By Roger L. Simon
and Dyanne Asimow Simon

We are two Hollywood screenwriters who went to Cuba for the festival of New Latin American films, mostly out of curiosity, but also hoping to exchange views with leftwing filmmakers in a context impossible at home.

We carried with us our ambivalence toward working in the 'bowels of the beast,' a familiar mixture of guilt and arrogance. We were wrong on both counts. We had no reason to be arrogant; the Cubans made movies as well as Hollywood. We had no reason to be guilty; Barbra Streisand was one of their favorite actresses. Moreover, when the lights came up on the smoke-filled screening rooms of ICAIC (the Cuban Cinema Institute), you could still tell the directors by their Levi jackets and the writers by the pained expressions on their faces.

The Cuban film industry is any red-blooded American cineaste's fantasy. Fidel himself established it the day after taking power. A group of young filmmakers, educated by the Italian neorealists, put to "establishment" use the passion and power of the cinema of the early '60s.

It's a little mind-boggling for American screenwriters to imagine a cinema in which artistic and social values are given top priority. We didn't see one Cuban producer reading *Variety* in Spanish to check the grosses on the latest Nicaraguan release. In fact, in Cuba the success of a film is measured by its effect on people and their attitudes.

Riding in a taxi on the way to the Museum of the Revolution, we queried our driver as to his favorite movies. "Rumanian action pictures," he said, evoking visions of twelfth-rate Westerns in saturated color. But when asked to specify a particular favorite, without hesitation he chose *Portrait of Teresa*, a social drama about the struggle of Cuban men to accept complete equality in work and sexual relations with women. When we pointed out it was in no way an action picture, he said, "Ah, but it is about my life!"

Ambrosio Fornet, the editor of a Cuban literary magazine, who was the screenwriter (in collaboration with director Pastor Vega) on the film, pointed out that this response is typical. A wife and mother's right to expect her husband to share household chores while she expresses herself not only economically but also artistically has become a hot topic for debate on TV, in periodicals and among community groups in this country with its long history of "machismo."

It is the kind of debate never engendered by our own commercial films, with the possible exception of *China Syndrome*.

What we found refreshing about *Teresa* was that it was in no way polemical. It dealt with realistic contemporary contradictions in a compassionate manner and made no attempt to resolve them according to a specific dogma. Indeed, the end of the film leaves the audience with questions it must answer itself.

While the Cubans would like to make movies about contemporary social issues, they have a peculiar problem. Coming out of the documentary tradition, the Cuban cinema has been director oriented. The director is the star. His or her name appears on the marquee. Screenwriting as a profession does not yet exist.

More writers.

But the truth is some directors cannot write and movies like *Teresa* require advanced literary skills. The novelists, playwrights and journalists selected by the directors to fulfill their visions are often too inexperienced cinematically to craft the necessary scripts. The result has been an excess of historical films in which a recreation of past events is used to cover up for a lack of structure, characterization and interesting point of view.

Fornet is in the forefront of those who would like to rectify this situation. We were bemused to have him pumping us for information about our union, the Writers Guild of America, and about the role of screenwriters in Hollywood. We should have warned him he was opening a Pandora's Box of unproduced scripts (15 thousand last year registered at the WGA), pointless producer's revisions, endless shop talk and egotistical credit battles.

Shaw said we are defined, even created, by our careers and this seems to go for socialist societies as well as for capitalist. Two kinds of screenwriters predominate in Hollywood—those who say they hate writing and are only in it to direct and the literateurs who disdain the rough-and-tumble infighting of the "industry."

Fornet is clearly of this latter type, the kind of retiring. He is the essentially decent man you can find poring over the *New York Review of Books* in one of the

little bookstalls in Westwood.

Jorge Fraga, production director of ICAIC, has the assured authority of someone who could be heading one of our major studios (would that he were). Tomas Gutierrez Alea, the leading Cuban *auteur* director, is the kind of urbane artiste you could just see as the lion of one of our more literate talk shows, like Dick Cavett.

But there is a difference.

And it was that difference that made us a little depressed, more than a little jealous the longer we stayed in Cuba. What a pleasure it would be to work there. Whatever the difficulties, whatever the competition that must arise in an art form requiring such expenditures of money, at least there is an assumed commonality of goals and interests and a commitment to the audience that goes beyond entertainment.

That is not to say all is nirvana in the Cuban film industry. Besides the script problems, we noted a degree of stiffness in the acting style in several of the movies and laxity in some of the editing. Also, Fraga reminded us, they are competing on the international distribution market and that must make them, in part anyway, a commercial cinema.

That is not all bad, of course, because a commercial cinema viewed another way is a popular cinema. If people don't want to pay with their money and time to see a movie, there's a good chance it's either crap or a rarefied "art" film that doesn't communicate.

The dark shadow.

The irony is for all the achievements of Cuban cinema, we remain the touchstone, a dark shadow lurking 90 miles off shore to be both hated and admired. For all the perfidy and destruction perpetrated by the American government on the Cuban people, we are still their close neighbor with a population some 25 times their own and a culture that, while often venal and garish, is finally one of the more vibrant in the world.

Even with blockades, boycotts, foreign policy and military stand-offs, there's no way to stop our influence. It's in the wind blowing south from Miami. A million Russian troops could never equal it.

The thought is in a strange way chastening to a couple of "Cultural Workers" from Lotusland. Out here where the sun shines and you can even buy your way out of the smog with a hilltop house and an air conditioner in your BMW, it's easy to forget what you do has an impact far broader than on your bank account or your ego. All too often what we do seems like fun and games, but in reality we're producing one of America's few remaining successful export commodities—and perhaps even the most potent of them.

The more time we spent in Cuba, the more we realized what we did was in deadly earnest. (American Cultural Imperialism was Topic A for the lectures and discussions conducted most mornings during the festival at ICAIC.) We began to feel more than ever, the responsibility of having our fingers, however lightly, on the trigger of that star-studded laser beam called Hollywood.

Roger L. Simon is the author of *The Big Fix* and other *Moses Wine* detective novels. Dyanne Asimow Simon is a playwright who is writing a screenplay about Emma Goldman.

