

# On Gays and Families

by Ed Sikov

## *Improper Conduct*

Directed by Nestor Almendros  
and Orlando Jimenez-Leal

## *Terence Davies Trilogy*

Directed by Terence Davies

## *The Fiancee*

Directed by Gunter Reisch  
and Gunter Rucker

## *Kukurantumi*

Directed by King Ampaw

## *Tukana*

Directed by Chris Owen

The issue of anti-gay oppression in Cuba consistently strikes raw nerves. Writers unwilling or unable to draw a connection between our country's strong and often violent hostility to gays and the political and economic system in which such prejudice festers, are often quite eager to link anti-gay oppression in Cuba to the categorical evils of communism. At the same time, gay leftists are faced with the persistently demoralizing fact that the reorganization of society by revolutionary means may well lead in practice not to a freer, more just society, but only to a recodifying of the same rigid bourgeois values that made the need for revolution imperative.

*Improper Conduct*, a documentary by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal, will no doubt serve to convince the anti-communists among us that they were right all along. The film consists of a series of interviews with 28 Cuban exiles intercut with stock footage from the early days of the Cuban revolution, shots of crowds in Havana and on boats from El Mariel, and, presiding ominously above

all, shots of Fidel Castro himself. What the film does not contain, unfortunately, is analysis—of political systems, of the nature of anti-gay oppression, of the history of Cuba, of anything that would have made it more than just an anti-communist diatribe.

Directors Almendros and Jimenez-Leal have accumulated as their chief source of evidence the testimony of men and women who have chosen to leave Cuba and live elsewhere: a number of writers, a transvestite performer, some students, a hairdresser, a doctor, a sociologist. The rhetorical point being made by this assortment of dissidents is that antipathy toward Castro crosses the lines of class, gender, sexual preference, and educational background. But the utter absence of even one person willing to defend the revolution serves to collapse the spectrum artificially into a single point of view. This is not simply an act of omission. It takes an extraordinary amount of manipulation to produce a film which implies that everyone who left Cuba not only left for the same basic reasons but also now shares the same political viewpoint.

Such manipulation involves the complete evacuation of analysis from the film. Questions are never posed. For example, has the woman from Madrid who acted as an aide to Castro before being thrown in jail now renounced her Marxism? If so, what has she embraced? Does she agree with the writer in Paris (who notes that "gays are never sad" and heterosexuals "tend to be melancholic" and therefore are able to get sentimentally attached "to an old shoe") when he claims that "the primitive Cuban mind" is attracted to the image of two women in bed together? Or with Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the exiled writer, who claims that everyone "who lived the *dolce vita* in Havana" was persecuted? It would have

been interesting, perhaps crucial, to know why this woman supported Castro, why she was jailed, how she now views her own participation in the revolution, where she thinks the revolution failed, and how she would alter it to rectify the injustices she claims exist.

Almendros and Jimenez-Leal refuse to press any issue, to question any statement; they are content to let their subjects say just about anything as long as it puts Castro's Cuba in a bad light. Their defenders, I am sure, will argue that the filmmakers' silence is deliberate, that they want merely to let their subjects speak for themselves. But the directors are far from silent. Apart from the undeniable political messages emanating from the film's organization, as well as the facts and figures they present through voice-over narration, they tip their hand when they add a menacing music track to stock video footage of Castro—which they present, not in its original form, but in slow motion. The image of Castro is already so overloaded with the ideological residue of our country's relentless propaganda campaign that slowing it down and adding eerie music turns this sequence into a ludicrous self-parody.

There is nothing wrong with films that take ideological positions and pursue them; nor is there a rule that filmmakers must come up with answers. Indeed, it is the privilege of art in a free society to avoid answering anything. It is the fault of this film, however, that so few questions are posed, so few ideas analyzed, so little light shed.