



News

ALMENDROS: THE ANTI-CASTRO DIRECTOR WHO PUT THE LEFTISTS ON GUARD

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In recent years there have been few documentaries as controversial as "Improper Conduct," which generated a wheelbarrow's-worth of newsprint after its New York debut in 1984 and which should stir a similar response in Chicago, where it is being shown through Feb. 16 at Facets Multimedia.

Codirected by renowned cinematographer Nestor Almendros ("Days of Heaven," "Kramer vs. Kramer" and "Places in the Heart") and Orlando Jimenez-Leal ("El Super"), "Improper Conduct" is a volatile brew, an indictment of life in Fidel Castro's Cuba that attacks the Castro regime's drive for total state control by focusing on its maltreatment of Cuba's homosexual population.

No longer denied even by Castro's most fervent Western supporters, the regime's anti-gay policies (which range from harassment to terms in forced-labor camps to outright imprisonment and deportation) are a particular sore point on the Left, where gay rights is generally felt to be a black-and-white issue. So if Castro's Cuba can be shown to systematically oppress gays, which is what "Improper Conduct" tries to do, then how can anyone who claims to be in favor of gay rights or human rights in general turn around and give the Castro regime a pass?

It's a nasty paradox, to say the least; and if the Leftist opponents of

"Improper Conduct" have a legitimate gripe, it is that the film uses the gay-rights issue to attack, as one critic put it, "the legitimacy of the Cuban revolution."

But according to Almendros, "launching a frontal attack on the Cuban revolution" was precisely what he and Jimenez-Leal were trying to do.

"Yes," Almendros says, "the film is aimed at Western liberals and Leftists (who are sympathetic toward Castro's Cuba). But it is not only done for them; it is done by them. The people who are interviewed in the movie are people who were, in the past, on the same line--people like Carlos Franqui

(former editor of Cuba's official party newspaper, "Revolucion"), Guillermo Cabrera-Infante (novelist and former Cuban cultural attache) and Susan Sontag, all of whom were very enthusiastic about the Cuban revolution.

"So most of our witnesses are people who were in favor of what Castro said he was going to do and who really haven't changed their point of view. What has changed is that they realized that the Cuban revolution was not what they expected it to be."

Related by a vast number of Cuban exiles who witnessed, or were subjected to, political and sexual oppression by the Castro regime, the litany of horrors in "Improper Conduct" begins in 1965 with the founding of the so-called U.M.A.P. (Military Units to Aid Production) camps.

Social and political dissidents of many sorts, and homosexuals in particular, were rounded up and sent to these camps, where they were forced to engage in hard physical labor under very harsh conditions. These tropical gulags were closed in 1969, in part because of pressure from foreign intellectuals; but according to "Improper Conduct," similar camps soon were established and the campaign against anyone who dressed in "foreign" styles or displayed "extravagant" (i.e. effeminate) behavior was stepped up.

According to Cuban poet, Herberito Padilla, these new, even sterner measures had an unusual origin.

Interviewed in the film, Padilla says that "Raul Castro (Fidel Castro's brother), who had just returned from a trip to Bulgaria, said he had found the streets very 'clean' there--that is, they were free of 'anti-social' elements. He asked how they had done it--he was particularly concerned with homosexuality--and was told: 'We have a special camp for anti-social elements, especially the homosexuals you're so concerned about.' " It was, adds Almendros, a case of "monkey see, monkey do."

Then, in 1980, Cuba was rocked by two internal explosions. When Cuban guards were temporarily removed from the Peruvian embassy in Havana, some 10,000 Cuban citizens stormed the grounds, asking for political asylum. This was followed by the exodus to Florida of 125,000 Cubans in the so-called

"Mariel flotilla"--an event that so clearly implied a high degree of dissatisfaction among "normal" Cubans that the regime added several thousand ordinary criminals to the outward flow and deported thousands of homosexuals as well.

But if, as "Improper Conduct" amply demonstrates, gays have been singled out for harsh treatment in Cuba, one wonders why this should be so? Is this just a malign outgrowth of the "machismo" that supposedly prevails in many Latin cultures? Or does it also have some bearing on the drive toward total control of private life that is a trait of all totalitarian regimes, whether of the Left or the Right?

In the film, an interesting explanation is offered by Susan Sontag, who says that "if homosexuals in such countries are identified with women--that is, as 'weak' elements--and the country's ideology is focused on strength, and strength is associated with virility, then male homosexuals are viewed as a subversive element. It's an element that in itself implies that power isn't the only go of adult life."

Although "Improper Conduct" is a sad but fascinating document, the response to the film, both from the Left and the Right, has been even more intriguing.

Ornenez-Leal have been attacked as purveyors of "mediocre" anti-Castro propaganda and condemned for their lack of "historical focus" by Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutierrez Alea. On the other hand, he has been praised in the editorial columns of the National Review and the Wall Street Journal--the latter organ saying that the film should "make clear" why the United States ought to do whatever the Sandanista government in Nicaragua.

"That did disturb me," Almendros says, "because I think it's taking things to an extreme and, in effect, doing a favor for Gutierrez Alea and not receiving any help from right-wing institutions, monetarily or otherwise, which in a certain way pleases me. Even though it means that the film has been less successful economically--it still ink that is a good sign."

Born in Spain, from which his Loyalist family fled when Gen. Francisco Franco came to power, the 58-year-old Almendros came to Cuba at age 17. Already interested to organize Havana's first film society in 1948, along with Gutierrez Alea and Cabrera Infante, and when the Batista dictatorship fell to Castro's forces in 1959, Almendros was enthusiastic.

"Yes," he recalls, "I was (enthusiastic) at the beginning, I'm ashamed to say, because I think we should be blamed for that. Looking back at what happened that very first year, they were there.

"The mass trials that were conducted against war criminals--I remember that I was a little shocked by that, but at the same time I pulled back, thinking 'I don't want to also remember being very happy when the government closed down El Diario del Marina, which was the traditional reactionary newspaper of Cuba. I know now I was wrong; I shouldn't have been happy. And that we were not able to see that as bad sign was our fault."

Almendros left Cuba in 1962, after his documentary and its lack of uplifting political content. Relocating in France, Almendros began to collaborate with Eric Rohmer and the late Francois Truffaut, becoming known as an innovative, masterful cin on Rohmer's "My Night at Maud's" and "Claire's Knee" and Truffaut's "The Wild Child" and "The Last Metro."

Hollywood opened up to Almendros after he won an Academy Award for Days of Heaven" in 1978, but his desire to join Jimenez-Leal in the making of

"Improper Conduct" suggests that he has not "gone Hollywood" at all.

Assessing the impact of the film, every interview the Cubans and the American pro-Castro people are giving, they acknowledge the U.M.A.P. camps but not the later oppressions. I'm almost sure that is a case of what is called the decided that denying everything would be impossible, so it would be better to admit a little bit in the hope you would believe the rest.

"But that they all now acknowledge the existence that is our little victory, Orlando's and mine, because they never admitted that before.

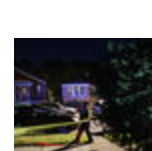
"Also, in Communist countries they have this tactic of having 'thaws,'

and apparently there's been a change, which I think our film did something to trigger. Even though they have not changed the extreme legislation against homosexuals, they are not bothering them so much right now.

"But I together with Vietnam, among the most regimented countries in the world--much more so than Poland, which everybody pities. The fact that Lech Walesa can move freely through the streets of Warsaw in Cuba. There he would be put in front of a firing squad for high treason.

"So it's very regimented in Cuba, but identify author) Renaldo Arenas, who is the greatest young Cuban writer, could leave in the Mariel flotilla is just an example of the inefficiency of the police. The so-called 'inefficiency of thy advantage this regime has."

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