

Cuban Exiles Join On Film to Indict Castro's Revolution

By ANNETTE INSDORF

Since Fidel Castro took power in Cuba 25 years ago, approximately one million Cubans (10 percent of the population) have left the country. For Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal — the directors of "Improper Conduct," opening Wednesday at the Cinema Studio — there are noteworthy reasons why Cuba has the highest rate of defection in Latin America. Through interviews with more than two dozen exiles — many of them former Castro officials and sympathizers — their filmed investigation takes a stand: as Vincent Canby wrote when the film was shown in the 1984 New Directors/ New Films festival, "'Improper Conduct' is something very rare in films — an intelligent attack on Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution."

This 110-minute documentary, which won the Grand Prize at the recent International Human Rights

for his cinematography on such visually sumptuous stories as "Sophie's Choice," "The Blue Lagoon," and "The Last Metro."

Orlando Jiménez-Leal had a hard time working in Cuba, after his short film, "P.M." (1961), was banned and confiscated by Castro's police. A newsreel cameraman in Cuba since the age of 15, he had co-directed with Mr. Almendros "La Tumba Francesa" (1960), an ethnological movie about an Afro-Cuban-Haitian sect. "I'd been following his movies ever since," Mr. Almendros said, "and admired 'El Super' very much. Then he made for RAI [Italian television] a film about the history of revolutionary Cuba which I found very interesting, so I suggested we work together."

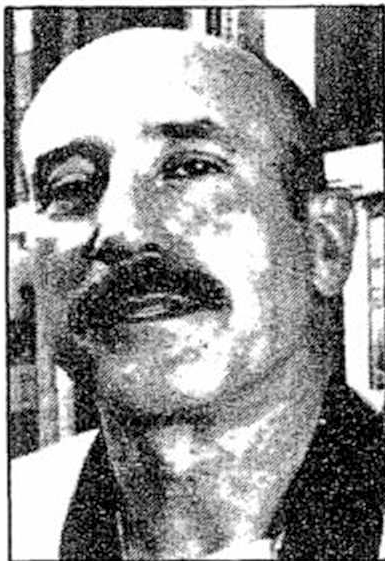
"Improper Conduct" is actually a French production, as the funding came from Antenne 2 (French TV) — which showed a 52-minute version last month — and Les Films du Louange.

Festival in Strasbourg, France, begins with footage of an incident that shocked the world in 1966: when the Cuban National Ballet performed in Paris, 10 members requested political asylum. "Improper Conduct" then gives a short historical résumé of the Revolution, from the euphoria that followed the overthrow of the military dictator Fulgencio Batista, to the repression and disillusionment that set in.

Mr. Almendros — the Academy-Award-winning cinematographer of "Days of Heaven," as well as most of the films of François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer, and Mr. Jiménez-Leal — co-director of "The Super" (1980), a comedy about Cuban exiles adjusting to life in Manhattan — build their indictment through interviews with a wide spectrum of dissidents. Prominent writers like Guillermo Cabrera Infante, former officials like Martha Frayde (ex-Ambassador for Castro at UNESCO), and victims of Castro's anti-homosexual policies attest to the persecution of "individualists" who demonstrate "improper conduct" — the regime's term for behavior (political, artistic or personal) that deviates from Cuba's "macho" ideal.

Among the film's focal points are the establishment in the late 1960's of U.M.A.P. (Military Units for Aid to Production) or forced-labor camps, to which homosexuals were sent on the basis even of denunciation by anonymous informers; the fact that — despite Castro's allegation in a 1979 French television interview that "in

Mr. Almendros said, "The film is centered on male homosexuality because the Revolution has been obsessed with it: the U.M.A.P. camps were created for *this* issue. There's a black problem in Cuba too, but that



Nestor Almendros, who was co-director of "Improper Conduct"

the 20 years of the Revolution, there have been no disappearances" — writers literally disappeared; distortion by the Cuban media of the Peruvian Embassy incident — when 10,000 Cubans crowded into the embassy overnight and asked for asylum; and Castro's addition of approximately 2,000 criminals to the 125,000 refugees in the "Mariel flotilla" exodus, in order to mislead public opinion.

During an interview in his Paris apartment, Mr. Almendros explained that he felt obliged to make "Improper Conduct" because "no one had done it. I've been telling Cuban friends that a film must be made about what's going on in Cuba — and nobody has," he lamented.

Although the 53-year-old Mr. Almendros was brought up and educated in Cuba, he was actually born in Barcelona. (His father was forced into exile by Franco's victory.) During the Batista dictatorship, he studied filmmaking in Europe, and returned to Cuba when Castro came to power. Since 1962, however, he has been living principally in Paris. He is best known to American audiences

would be another movie. And I think a Cuban black should be the one to do it.

"Our film is not about all of Cuba or everything that has happened there," he continued. "It's obviously about *human rights*. To talk about fighting illiteracy would be another movie. Why don't films that deal with the literacy campaign show that some people — for writing — go to jail? I would suggest a double bill of 'Improper Conduct' with one of the Cuban films. In our movie, we include a clip from a film made about the Marielitos by the ICAIC [Cuban film industry], which owns all film production, distribution, exhibition, and even film magazines. It's a total monopoly, bigger than the Soviet industry or Film Polski, which at least have different production units."

Asked why only exiles were interviewed, Mr. Almendros replied, "The difficulties of getting permission to film in Cuba are insurmountable, especially for an investigation like this one. Even under the best of circumstances, we would never have been given any freedom of action. The people filmed could not have spoken openly, for fear of reprisals."

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Even some of the exiles were afraid to testify. As Mr. Almendros said, "A few of the interviewees had fakes names in the movie. Many, at the last minute, had a sudden toothache or twisted ankle. America has a law that

homosexual immigrants can be expelled. It's not always enforced, but some were afraid it could be used against them. Many, of course, had family in Cuba and feared reprisals. So the people who wanted to speak with us did so as a totally generous or even heroic act."

For example, the poet Armando Valladares — who spent 22 years in prison before being released at the behest of President François Mitterrand of France — tells a particularly shattering tale in a bucolic Madrid setting. The audience learns of Robertico, a 12-year-old boy who was imprisoned for playing with a gun he found, tortured by guards, raped by five other inmates — and, consequently, labeled a homosexual.

With emotion inherent in the subject, the directors opted for a simple style, or what they term "an *anti-esthetic*. We did *non-lighting*, because for economical and esthetic reasons, we had only one soft light. The space was always small and we were always in medium shot or close-up."

Now that this directing experience is behind him, Mr. Almendros is awaiting the publication of his book, "A Man with a Camera," which Farrar, Straus & Giroux is bringing out this month. Does he plan to direct more films? "No more for the moment," he answered wearily. "It takes too much out of you. Being a cinematographer is much better: you just do your work and then relax. Directing is not a vocation on my part. If I do it again, it won't be for pleasure but as an obligation." ■