

# Trouble in Paradise?

*Improper Conduct* is a difficult film to judge. As a description of social and political oppression in Cuba, it is impressive; as an analysis of the strides and stumbles of the Castro regime, it falls short.

The feature-length documentary, based on the testimony of twenty-eight Cuban exiles, was jointly directed by two prominent expatriates, Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal. For more than fifteen years, Almendros has been director of photography for Eric Rohmer and Francois Truffaut. He has also worked on such prestigious movies as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *Days of Heaven*, for which Almendros won an Oscar in cinematography. Jimenez Leal co-directed *El Super*, a 1980 work that portrayed the difficulties Cuban exiles face in adjusting to life in New York City.

In *Improper Conduct*, Almendros and Jimenez Leal draw on the testimony of witnesses, archival newsreel footage, and the commentary of non-Cuban intellectuals (including Susan Sontag). The recollections, the core of the case against Castro, are generally delivered in static medium shots and close-ups. Among those interviewed: distinguished writers Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Heriberto Padilla, and Armando Valladares; Carlos Franqui, former editor of the Communist Party newspaper *Revolucion*; Martha Frayde, formerly Cuba's representative to UNESCO, and assorted unknowns, such as a hairdresser and a tour guide.

The witnesses tell of mass arrests in the 1960s of "antisocial elements"—dissidents, members of religious cults, and especially homosexuals. They describe incarceration in camps known as Military Units to Augment Production, where the prisoners suffered forced labor, mistreatment, and—again, particularly the homosexuals—humiliation.

And we hear about censorship, severance of dissident intellectuals from public life, imprisonment for sending literary manuscripts abroad or for trying to leave the country, denunciation by the neighborhood Surveillance Committee (followed by arrest), and the 1980 mass defection of "Marielitos."

Cuban poets are jailed for what they write, homosexuals for what they are. Such injustice deserves to be condemned, but I found myself wanting additional information about the specific cases. A respected American witness, B. Ruby Rich, recently wrote in *American Film* that "my



A Coke bottle takes on divine proportions in 'The Gods Must Be Crazy.'

own trips to Cuba both before and after the Mariel exodus, and my contacts with a number of lesbians and gay men there, suggest a very different reality from that constructed by the emigrés in *Improper Conduct* . . ."

Though the exiled witnesses are themselves credible, the film as a whole fails to develop a context for their statements. Is the Castro regime more homophobic than other macho governments in Central and South America? Should nothing be said about Cuba's rising standard of living, increased literacy, and improved public health? How does one account for the domestic Cuban films that have been critical of the government?

The number of people who have fled Cuba since the revolution is telling—roughly one million, or 10 per cent of the population. But I can easily imagine 10 per cent of the U.S. population skipping out after even the most benign socialist revolution. Palm Beach, for instance, would be emptied.

I would have liked to hear from those still in Cuba: ordinary supporters of Castro as well as homosexuals and the disenfranchised. The filmmakers explain that "the difficulties of getting permission to film in

Cuba are insurmountable, especially for an investigation like this one." True enough, but the absence of such material keeps me from believing that this disturbing picture accurately represents the whole.

At the other end of the spectrum, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a white-made South African film, blithely ignores that country's racial oppression and depicts black Africans in broadly comic terms.

But I can't write off this fresh, fast-paced, funny, and utterly disarming film.

*The Gods Must Be Crazy* starts off like a simple-minded ethnographic documentary. A group of bush people are living in the most relentlessly arid and isolated region of the Kalahari desert. They survive by extracting water from roots and hunting occasional animals.

An unseen narrator informs us that these innocents have a happy existence, are self-sufficient, and know nothing of greed, envy, and violence. The peaceful idyll is shattered, however, when an errant plane flies overhead and the pilot unthinkingly jettisons a Coca-Cola bottle.

The recipients of this strange object regard it as a gift from the gods. The natives

put it to use grinding roots and making music. But it soon becomes a coveted object, and the squabbling leads to the discovery that a bottle can be used as a deadly weapon. At that point, the tribe decides there must have been a mistake; one member is dispatched to the end of the Earth to return the offending item to the deities. His journey takes him to the outskirts of "civilized" society, where he runs across a vast array of moderns, thus setting up numerous bits of cross-cultural humor.

*The Gods Must Be Crazy* boasts strong comic acting, delightfully reworks old slapstick material, and displays spectacular locations in the Kalahari, Botswana, and Namibia. A cast of antic animals is featured as well, including one rhinoceros that compulsively runs around putting out campfires.

Jamie Uys, a South African filmmaker credited with twenty-two feature works in thirty-four years, was producer, director, writer, and editor. So far as I know, this is the first of his films to be exhibited in the United States.

Uys proves witty and original. Though entertainment from South Africa produces an uneasy feeling in me, the film's considerable charm diminished my resistance. ■

## Hits and Misses

### The Fourth Man

A deliciously kinky psycho-erotic thriller by Dutch filmmaker Paul Verhoeven (*Soldier of Orange*, *Spetters*). The central figure is a bisexual writer who experiences horrific and intensely visual fantasies. He fails to heed dire signs, becomes involved with a possibly homicidal Delilah, and is ultimately unable to distinguish between reality and the products of his heightened imagination. Jeroen Krabbe convincingly portrays the writer, and Renee Soutendijk is his Delilah.

### Cloak and Dagger

Mostly funny kiddie fantasy, in which Henry Thomas (the child star of *E.T.*) finds that his toy soldiers and video games can take on a larger life. Viewers should be warned that this movie is, among other things, a paid advertisement for Atari, Inc., one of whose games is prominently featured.

### Splash

Walt Disney Studios finally produce a feature film that can be enjoyed by adults. This is a rather endearing romantic comedy: The blond mermaid falls in love with and pursues an astonished and much embarrassed Yuppie. Daryl Hannah is alluring as the pisciform enchantress.



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