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MOVIE REVIEWS

Cuban film documents persecution of gays

By Eleanor Ringel

Film Editor

In 1966, when the Cuban National Ballet performed in Paris, 10 of its members requested political asylum. Their reason? They were tired of trying to toe-shoe the line in the artistically repressive atmosphere of Castro's Cuba.

Actually, given the sobering evidence presented in "Improper Conduct," the term "artistic repression" is euphemistic at best. Made by two exiles — celebrated cinematographer Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal — the documentary is a testimony to the sickening, systematic persecution of homosexuals (especially male homosexuals) in Cuba.

Interestingly, in the Northeast (New York, etc.), "Improper Conduct" has sparked considerable controversy, mostly because it contradicts the intellectual left's sweet dream of untroubled red sails in the Caribbean sunset. Instead, it suggests that a communist regime can be run by bigoted brutes as easily as a fascist one can.

Approximately 27 Cuban exiles, most of them writers and artists, recount horror stories that, in some cases, almost would be funny if they weren't true. The movie's title is



FIDEL CASTRO: With Martha Frayde, Cuba's ex-ambassador to UNESCO, and unidentified man.

taken from a loose term the government applied to anyone who didn't fit in with the new regime. As writer Susan Sontag, one of the few non-Cubans interviewed, says, "If homosexuals ... are identified with women, i.e., as weak elements, and when a country's ideology is founded on strength and strength is associated with virility, then male homosexuals are viewed as a subversive element."

As early as 1965, life in Cuba for gays became a lot like life in Nazi Germany for Jews. Long hair,

Clockwork Orange," gay men were shown nude photos of females and males; if they responded negatively to the former and positively to the latter, they were punished. They soon figured out it was smarter to whistle and hoot at the women like any self-respecting macho Latino.

The problem with "Improper Conduct" is not that it's a polemic (it's crushingly obvious that this is a one-sided affair), but that, despite the eloquence of the witnesses, it is essentially a segment of "60 Minutes" blown up into a two-hour movie. The endless succession of talking heads and the unhappy similarity of their stories is debilitating. You care, but ultimately you're bored.

"Improper Conduct" is a courageous political act, but as a film, it is repetitive and draining in ways it doesn't intend. As one speaker says in describing the different forms harassment took, "All you get are variations on the same theme."

The same may be said about this movie. However, it is worth a look, if not a stay, for the entire two hours. ■

■ **Improper Conduct:** Directed by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal. The film is unrated, but the subject matter is suggested for adults. Theater: Ansley