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Documenting Cuban repression

By LAURIE HORN
Herald Arts Writer

There could not be a soul in Miami who, on some level, does not live daily with the result of 25 years of repression in Cuba. Clearly, some live with it more intimately than others — as those who were incarcerated in Cuban prisons or their families sadly know.

But Miami is not the world. And to tell the world what is a daily fact of consciousness here, Academy Award-winning cinematographer Néstor Almendros (*Days of Heaven*) and Orlando Jiménez Leal (the codirector of *El Super*), have made a two-hour documentary titled *Improper Conduct*.

The intention of the film is to document the growth of repression in Cuba not against those who openly expressed political opposition to the regime — those were the natural targets — but rather against those who by some misfortune managed to reveal themselves as too idiosyncratic, too frail, too human. This is a social repression — the same mentality that in the Soviet Union labels dissent as mental illness — except that since Cuba is less secure even than Russia, the reaction is more violent.

While prostitutes, poets and social nonconformists have all been arrested, interrogated, tortured and jailed, the film focuses in particular on the obsession of both Castros (both Fidel and his brother Raúl) with the persecution of homosexuals.

"In Cuba there are no Jews, but there are homosexuals," one of the exiles quotes Jean-Paul Sartre as saying. And in fact, just as the word "Jew" became a sinister insult in Germany (an insult applied not just to Jews, but to anyone in disfavor) the most vulgar Spanish epithet for "homosexual" has long held similar status in Cuba.

Of course, it went further than insults. Accused under the nebulous

Movie Review

Improper Conduct ★★★ (Unrated)

CREDITS
Writer/directors: Nestor Almendros, Orlando Jiménez Leal
Cameramen: Dominique Merlin
Sound: Daniel Delmau, Phil Pearl
Editors: Michael Pion, Alain Tortoise
English narration: Jeffrey Lawrence Carey
Background research: Dr. Carlos Ripoll
Producers: Les Films du Losange, Margaret Menegoz-Barbet Schroeder, Antenne 2, Michel Thoulouze

Running time: 115 minutes

charge of "improper conduct," thousands were jailed.

In two hours of careful interviews, 28 exiles tell in Spanish and sometimes in French of incarcerations first in the notorious U.M.A.P. (Military Units to Aid Production) camps, later in prisons.

The narration (in English) informs the audience that the age of criminal liability was lowered to 16, that the death penalty was restored. As the camera surveys his conservatively cut white pants, white shoes and simple red-and-white striped polo shirt, one of the jailed homosexuals now living in New York says simply that he could have been arrested merely for appearing in such "extravagant" attire.

The directors have used documentary footage where available — of Fidel's early victory marches and of the Mariel boatlift, for example. And, as often as possible, the camera situates the interview subjects in his or her environment before focusing, with the luminous Almen-

dros touch, on the softly lit face.

But the bulk of the movie is testimony — story after story, some told by such writers as playwright Rene Ariza, novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante and poet Armando Valladares, who was jailed for 22 years. All of it is subtitled in English (there are no Spanish subtitles for the French portions). Watching is a bit like plowing through Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*: an important political document, but because of the necessity to catalog, not the most mobile of vehicles. After an hour, I glanced at my watch.

Unfortunately, some of the most incisive footage comes in the second hour, when the movie begins to explore the political implications of the cult of machismo in all Cuban culture, not just under Castro. Cabrera Infante points out that all totalitarian states have persecuted homosexuals. And journalist Carlos Franqui reminds us that the biggest persecutors of homosexuals historically have been homosexual themselves. (Certainly, the Freudian viewpoint has been that overly macho behavior is a defense against fear of homosexuality.)

But the most provocative comment comes from Ariza. "To be different, to be strange, to behave improperly, isn't just forbidden, it's totally repressed. It can land you in jail. It's part of the Cuban character and has been for ages. It's not peculiar to Castro. There are many Castros. We must restrain the Castro that's in all of us."

That is a thought meant for Miami as well as for the world. After all, Miami has been Havana for 25 years.

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