

Nestor Almendros' film, 'Improper Conduct,' opens Friday.

Cuba on film: A picture of repression

By D. SULLIVAN
Special to The Herald

NEW YORK — Recalling his unhappy experiences at an exclusive but despotic boarding school, George Orwell, author of 1984, said, "I was in a world where it was not possible for me to be good."

Improper Conduct, a film by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, explores a similar theme in the expanded context of

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an entire country; Cuba under Castro. Made by and about Cuban exiles, it provides a glimpse of a system that combines the petty tyrannies of Orwell's school days with the nightmare of 1984.

The film opens Friday at the Cinematheque in Coral Gables.

In Castro's Cuba, any deviation from orthodoxy — from "improper conduct" to homosexual behavior to political dissent — is treated as a crime.

"To be different is not just forbidden," playwright Rene Ariza explains in the film, "it is repressed totally. It can land you in jail."

From 'Improper Conduct': In the mid-1960s Martha Frayde, former ambassador to UNESCO, had Castro's ear. Osvaldo Dorticos (right) Castro's former president, committed suicide in Cuba last June.

Ariza speaks of good authority; he was imprisoned five years on the charge of writing "counterrevolutionary propaganda."

Arbitrary arrest, suppression of personal freedom and incarceration in forced labor camps are the common experience of the famous writers, former Fidelistas, homo-

sexuals, Marielitos and others in this film who speak out against the injustices of Castro's regime. But *Improper Conduct* is not merely an exposé — it is a detailed portrayal of the totalitarian mentality. It attacks not only Castro's Cuba, but the mythic Cuba of utopian imagination.

Since he came to power 25 years ago, Castro has been a culture hero to some Americans who consider themselves "progressive." *Improper Conduct* reveals him as the enemy of the values his admirers here believe in: freedom of choice, freedom of expression, freedom to be who you are. These values

cannot be maintained when those who embody them — the intellectual, the artist, the homosexual — are singled out for persecution.

Since leaving Cuba in 1962, Almendros has become one of the world's leading cinematographers: Please turn to FILM / ED

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Exiles' film tells Cuba's other side

1952 to '55. Like Castro, he, too, freed Cuba from a dictator — when Batista led the coup against Machado in 1933, he was a revolutionary. Let's not forget that history repeats itself. This revolutionary government has a true knowledge of the situation to be dealt with.



Through history's second regime, Almonacid visited Batista in Havana, where he studied cinematography and worked for the state to film. And when Castro came to power in 1959, Almonacid refused.

Because of their insistence on presenting an entirely unfavorable picture, Almonacid and Zamora had difficulty finding backing for their project. The networks were interested only in a "balance" perspective, and public opinion was not interested at all. Almonacid appreciated this irony: that in what may be the most anti-Castro country in the world, funding was not available for a condemnation of the Castro regime. Instead, the money came from a Socialist television station in France.

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In his New York apartment, Almonacid discussed the struggle to make the film.

"People wonder why it's taken so long to make a statement about Cuba," he begins. "After all, I've been out for 25 years."

Playwright Rene Ariza: "To be different is not bad for Cuba."

Almonacid has daily aimed contempt for American critics, who maintain that the alleged benefits of the Castro regime outweigh or excuse the repression.

Almonacid is not pessimistic: He is optimistic to remember that Cuba had a great man behind it — Jose Martí, who helped to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule in America had Jefferson of Thomas Paine, we had this great thinker. And every Cuban has read his work. A country which does this, Martí being it can never be lost.

"It was a clear party in Paris, and the person sitting next to me asked about Cuba. He must not have liked what I said — he flinched the next time I spoke to him."

Almonacid was not alone in his mission. He was joined by other exiles, including a former member of the Cuban radio station and a major newspaper editor.

"I was told that if I said anything publicly, they would be arrested. I was told that if I said anything publicly, they would be arrested. I was told that if I said anything publicly, they would be arrested."

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