



Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal in Paris during the opening of 'Improper Conduct'

Filmmakers take new look at the injustices in Cuba

● Editor's note: Jon Marlowe reviews "Improper Conduct" on 5C.

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The film was sponsored by French television, so it's called "Mauvaise Conduite." It was shot partly in the United States, and it's also called "Improper Conduct." But it was directed by two exiles of the Cuban revolution and deals mainly with homosexuality, decreed a vice by the Cuban government. So its most proper name is "Conducta Impropia."

Conceived and directed by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, this feature-length documentary opens today here. It premiered in February during the Miami Film Festival, where it won thunderous applause.

But that's a foreseeable response from a sympathetic audience, points out Almendros, here with Jimenez Leal for the first week of the film's run. What's really amazing, he adds, is what happened during the screening at the recent festival of Cartagena in Colombia.

Toward the beginning of the film, Almendros says, there's historical footage from the

onset of the Cuban revolution. When Fidel Castro and Che Guevara appeared, about a third of the house clapped. "So I thought, 'This is going to be a hostile crowd,'" he says. But after the film reeled on and the impact of the diverse testimonies sank in, he concluded that "the audience was cheering for us."

In 1966, 10 male dancers of the Cuban National Ballet defected in Paris while on tour, prompting doubts about the society they fled. Then came frightening revelations about the forced-labor camps for the "rehabilitation" of homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and other manifestations of "Improper Conduct."

Therein lies the ultimate source of this 115-minute film, both filmmakers explain. But it also makes a broader statement on the lack of freedom — freedom of expression, for instance — in Cuba. Many of the testimonies, Almendros adds, are by heterosexuals such as novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante and poets Heberto Padilla and Armando Valladares.

The film wasn't realized until last year, after the two had shot a sort of pilot with their own funds and had been rejected by a number

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IMPROPER, from 1C

of would-be producers in America. The Mariel boatlift was instrumental in giving the picture its final boost, Almendros and Jimenez Leal agree, because here were people who had experienced the camps and other forms of suppression.

Almendros, 1978 Academy Award-winner as best cinematographer for "Days of Heaven," and Jimenez Leal, co-director of "El Super," are familiar with artistic suppression. Spanish-born, Cuban-raised Almendros was forced out from the island's film institute and later from his post as a weekly's film critic for not conforming to the

norm. Jimenez Leal's 1961 *cinema verite* short, "P.M.," was banned for showing a dark side of reality — Havana's night life. They both migrated in 1962: Almendros to Paris, where he became Francois Truffaut's main cameraman, and Jimenez Leal to New York via Miami.

For now, they're devoted to promoting "Conducta Impropia." It has been shown at festivals and other film events in Barcelona, New York, San Francisco, Hollywood — as part of a tribute by the Directors Guild to Almendros' work — and

Strasbourg, France, where it won the Human Rights Grand Prix. Now, sparked by the Miami run, it's about to open simultaneously in New York, San Francisco and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Any reactions from Cuba?

"Well, you know," Jimenez Leal says, "as far as Cuba is concerned, we are non-persons, so our film is a non-film. But there has been a piece in Granma (the Communist Party newspaper) implying — no names, of course — that there's a conspiracy sprung from France in order to

attack the revolution, using homosexuals as an excuse."

Almendros adds that there's been an almost absolute, and expected, silence from Castro sympathizers. Then he recalls a conversation with Spanish author and former communist Jorge Semprun, scriptwriter for "La Guerre Est Finie" and "Z."

"Semprun said that the standard party reaction would be to ignore the film unless they felt really hurt by it. If they have begun to denounce it, that moment has arrived."

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