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'IMPROPER CONDUCT'

Honest view of Cuba's Castro

By JANET MASLIN
New York Times Service

Nestor Almendros readily acknowledges that "Improper Conduct," the documentary he directed with Orlando Jimenez Leal about Fidel Castro's Cuba, has a sharply opinionated point of view. "There have been so many movies in favor of Castro, produced by the Cuban Government, that they can allow us to make one with another outlook," he said.

Almendros, the Cuban-born cinematographer, who won a 1978 Academy Award for "Days of Heaven," said that he and Jimenez Leal (who directed "El Super") wanted to avoid a television style for the film, "in which they show one person saying one thing, and then someone else giving the other side." Instead, in documenting the Castro government's treatment of supposedly objectionable characters — most of them artists or homosexuals — the directors interviewed 100 Cuban expatriates, eventually including 28 in the film. "That way," he said, "we could show some of the things that are not generally known about Cuba. The newspapers only talk in generalizations and talk about high politics. We wanted to talk about everyday life."

For "Improper Conduct," which was part of the recent "New Directors-New Films" series in New York, Almendros wanted a very simple visual style, and was careful to film his subjects in natural light and in full face ("because the camera is like a lie detector, and if you only see one eye it's only half the truth"). He is glad, in retrospect, to have been refused funds by the American television networks, since there were network executives who suggested that the interviews be filmed in English ("Everyone would have been much less candid," Almendros said) and that a network reporter be the anchor for the documentary. "Improper Conduct" received some financing from a French television company instead.

How did Almendros feel about the portrait of Cuban exiles in Brian De Palma's recent "Scarface?" "I thought it was awful, a racist movie like so many American films treating Hispanics," he said. "The blacks are better organized than us, they would never let that kind of thing pass. I will never work for Brian De Palma or for Daniel Petrie, who directed 'Fort Apache, the Bronx' — that is my little form of protest. Of course, it is also presumptuous, since I have not been asked."

Many of the world's most illustrious directors have requested Almendros's services since he photographed his first feature film, Eric Rohmer's 1966 "Collectioneuse." "A Man With a Camera," his detailed and instructive account of working with Rohmer, Francois Truffaut, Robert Benton, Barbet Schroeder and other directors, will be published in this country by Farrar Straus & Giroux in July.

"Mishima" is four weeks into production right now, filming in Tokyo with Paul Schrader directing, Francis Coppola and George Lucas as executive producers, John Bailey handling the cinematography and Philip Glass composing the score. Based on the life of the late novelist Yukio Mishima, it will star Ken Ogata, who recently starred in "The Ballad of Narayama."

According to Tom Luddy, worldwide marketing supervisor of Coppola's Zoetrope Studios, the film is set on the last day of Mishima's life, "from when he got up in the morning to when he took over an Army base in Ichigaya and ultimately committed suicide." This part will be filmed "in color, in a nervous, docudrama style," unlike the black-and-white flashback sequences, which will establish the author's past.

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