

At Miami International Film Festival, a new Cuban wave

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03/05/2015 3:38 PM | Updated: 03/06/2015 9:45 AM



'The Swimming Pool' MIAMI INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL

History has taught us that when a country is on the cusp of radical change, the first indications can be found in art – painting, literature, music and, since the 20th century, film.

Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 silent Russian classic *Battleship Potemkin* is one of the most influential movies of all time, as well as one of the best-known pieces of cinematic propaganda. The early works by Oscar-winning filmmaker Milos Forman (*Amadeus*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) were banned in his native Czechoslovakia in the 1960s because of their ruthless, satirical take on communism.

And today, a crop of young Cuban filmmakers has started to make independent movies on the island, outside the auspices of the government-controlled Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), buoyed by the availability of cheap digital cameras and a black-market distribution

system that allows their films to reach their audiences despite being widely banned in public cinemas.

And their work is starting to spread beyond their homeland. Miami Dade College's Miami International Film Festival, which runs Friday through March 15, is devoting its annual honorary tribute to an "Emerging Cuban Program" showcasing the works of five filmmakers, all in their late 20s and early 30s, whose movies are radically different from the state-approved, allegorical pictures that have long characterized Cuban cinema.

"These kids are signaling a smaller change," says Alejandro Rios, an authoritative scholar on Cuban film and a media relations executive for the college. "They're taking baby steps. We're not ready for a post-Castro Cuba yet. But they're not interested in the revolution. Instead, they are relating the consequences of decades without change, of 56 years of living stranded in time.

"A lot of the protagonists of these movies are frustrated people, still living on the battlefield long after the war was over. Notice there are no cute love stories or happy musicals. And none of this is known in Havana. The people living there don't know we are paying tribute to them. It's not in the news. They can't keep them from coming here, but ignoring them is also a way of censorship."

Among the films being screened:

- *The Project of the Century*, director Carlos Machado Quintela's imaginative black-and-white parable about the residents of an apartment building in Cienfuegos, near the nuclear power plant that was abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- *Hotel Nueva Isla (Hotel New Island)*, the story of the last inhabitant of a once-luxurious four-star resort that is now on the brink of collapse, produced by Claudia Calviño (*Juan of the Dead, Melaza*).
- *Venice*, an honest depiction of the lives of three young Cuban women living in Havana, directed by Kiki Álvarez.
- *Dark Glasses*, Jessica Rodriguez's drama about a blind woman living alone in the countryside who entertains an intruder by regaling him with stories based on Cuban history (the film will be screened as a work in progress).
- *The Missing of Kafka (El desaparecido de Kafka)*, a documentary about a Cuban photographer debating whether his work will be better appreciated after he's dead, directed by Marcel Beltrán (the film will be screened as a work in progress).

Earlier this week a pre-festival showcase of some other works by the directors were screened, including Quintela's award-winning *The Swimming Pool*, which uses a day in the lives of five disabled teens taking swimming lessons as a minimalist allegory for life in present-day Cuba, and *Mute Havana (Habana muda)*, a deft, subtle drama about the difficulties faced by Cubans wanting to work abroad, produced by Calviño.

Rodriguez, who is 28 and a rarity among the traditionally male-dominated Cuban film community, says these kinds of movies would have never been sanctioned by the government, which is why a growing indie scene has bloomed on the island.

"Filmmakers who work in conjunction with the ICAIC have a lot more resources and opportunities, even though they are still low budget," she says. "But the movies being made now are cheaper — digital cameras give you great quality and are affordable — and would have been impossible to make 20 years ago. New technology has democratized cinema. They have brought us freedom and independence in terms of subject matter. You don't have a producer who works for the state telling you what you can and can't do."

Jaie Laplante, executive director of the festival, says he first had the idea to showcase Cuban indie films during a Q&A with director Ernesto Daranas after a screening at the Tower Theater of his film *Conducta (Conduct)*, about a schoolteacher who takes a stand against authorities by helping a 12-year-old boy raised by a single mother addicted to drugs.

"An audience member asked, 'How did this film get made when the theme is clearly about people doing what they think is right regardless of the law?'" Laplante says. "The director replied, 'It got made by the holy spirit.' Here was someone who believed so much in the power of art and creativity as a spiritual force, he felt his film *needed* to get made. That's when I realized that these people were operating under an umbrella of freedom and these artists had been brave enough to say, 'Art above all.' I decided that was unquestionably the thing to focus on this year."

There is also a feeling among members of this brash new wave that it's important to shake up the identity and meaning that the term "Cuban cinema" has had for decades around the world.

"The new generation of Cuban filmmakers wants to shake up the reactions and thoughts people automatically have when they hear about a Cuban movie," says Quintela, 30. "In order for our films to regain their place in the landscape of international cinema, we have to pay close attention to the stories we want to tell and be rigorous about how we tell them. There are a lot of stories yet to be told that could bring back the clout the Cuban film industry once carried. We're just taking a different path than the people who came before us. That doesn't make us any less Cuban."

Beltrán, 30, who will also be presenting his short film *La nube (The Cloud)*, about a single mother whose life changes after her father dies and her brother moves in with her, says he believes the kind of work he's doing is a continuation of the films made by his elder predecessors.

"Everyone talks about a rupture between generations, and now there's a generation that's doing things that the previous one didn't," he says. "But I see it as a continuation."

"There were a lot of great Cuban filmmakers in the past. Perhaps the biggest difference is that we have a certain independence that they didn't. We're able to have final cut and choose our narratives. Before, those decisions were often made by the financiers, just like Hollywood studios often dictate the content of their films. But there's no pressure on us anymore. We are able to explore what the press cannot. Once journalists regain that freedom, then we can go back to telling love stories and crowd-pleasing comedies."

IF YOU GO

The 32nd Miami International Film Festival runs Friday through March 15 at various venues around Miami. The "Emerging Cuban Program" series will screen different movies throughout the festival. For a complete schedule of events, including the full slate of this year's event, visit www.miamifilmfestival.com (<http://www.miamifilmfestival.com/>) or call 305-237-3456.