



# Ciné Havana

by Tanya Tree

The Retrospective of Canadian Cinema at the Ninth International Festival of New Latin American Cinema held in Havana in December reflected Canada's image on film in the light of a different hemisphere. Primarily intended as a reciprocal gesture after the extensive Retrospective of Latin American Cinema offered at Toronto's Festival of Festivals in 1986, the retrospective in Havana for the first time exposed Latin moviegoers, and particularly Latin filmmakers and distributors, to the best of recent Canadian feature films. The Canadian delegation invited by the Cuban government included representatives from Telefilm Canada, the National Film Board, The Ontario Arts Council and La Société générale du cinéma du Québec as well as film directors and producers. In all, 22 features and 19, primarily animation and theatrical shorts, all in 35mm, were selected by the Cubans for the retrospective.

The only Canadian documentary screened, Michel Régnier's *Sucre Noir* was awarded the festival's award for Best Documentary about Latin America by a foreigner. Perhaps this distinction will encourage more Canadian filmmakers to turn their attention to Central and Latin America where many issues of importance to both continents await exploration through documentary and fiction. One such effort, Jackie Burroughs and Co.'s recent *Winter Tan* was not seen at the Festival although the actress was invited to accompany Philip Borsos' well-received *The Grey Fox*, which she starred in.

Jacqueline Levitin's *Eva: Guerrillera*, a Canadian feature with a Latin theme and setting, was also screened.

This independent drama, produced in Quebec and shot in Nicaragua, recounts the experiences of a Salvadorean resistance fighter and her relationship with a Canadian journalist. Such a film seems more appropriate in the context of a Latin Film Festival, where filmmaking and politics are inseparable, than in Canada where alienation, sexuality and violence are more common themes.

In comparison to Latin films, which focus primarily on political repression, gross social and economic inequality and guerrilla warfare, Canadian films appear rather tame, not to say trivial. Nevertheless, such recent successes as *Un Zoo la nuit*, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* met with an enthusiastic response from the sophisticated Cuban audiences. Roger Frappier's comment that the reception to his films in Cuba was "très différent" suggests the cultural gulf that separates Canada from Latin America. However, the enthusiasm and openness which characterized all the participants in this exchange was heartwarming to anyone interested in promoting North/South relations.

This year, Cuba's Festival coincided with the 20th anniversary of two important events: the first-ever Festival of Latin Cinema held in 1967 at Viña del Mar, Chile, and the death of Che Guevara, the revered revolutionary hero. Thus it was that the Monday after the arrival of most of the Canadians in Cuba, we attended a screening dedicated to the memory of Che, comprised of five documentaries about the hero and preceded by an awards ceremony to honor Santiago Alvarez and Joris Ivens. This event set the tone for those not accustomed to the role of films and their makers in the politics of liberation. Canadian filmmakers may have overdosed on the single-minded dedication of Latin filmmakers and their subjects to political and social issues. In Vancouver or Halifax, such concerns are other

peoples' and bloodshed, imprisonment, torture and guerrilla warfare are items on the news, not personal matters.

However, due in part to events like the annual International Film Festival in Havana, Latin American filmmakers' dedication to a *cinéma engagé* is finding echoes in Northern productions (for example, Oliver Stone's *Salvador*, understandably better appreciated in Havana than in Washington). If Canadian films do not reflect such issues, we may be excused on the grounds of underdevelopment. Like the struggling nations of Central and South America, Canada too, must assert its identity in the face of U.S. control of our media and more importantly, its distribution.

These realities were recognised and agreed upon by all concerned in a well-meaning albeit abortive attempt to hold a meeting of Latin and Canadian filmmakers in the midst of the hectic frenzy of the festival; the myriad programmed activities of the Canadian delegation, the ongoing screenings taking place in theatres all over Havana, the daily program at the Film Market, as well as everyone's personal agenda of appointments, the endless searching out of contacts and strengthening of existing ties.

In this instance, there had been a mix-up as to the exact time and place of the meeting. This characteristic muddle seemed to reflect the groups, made up on the one hand of filmmakers from Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru and, on the other, of Canadians from British Columbia, the Maritimes, Ontario and Quebec. After much confusion and waiting around, we finally settled in around tables by the pool at the Capri Hotel, overlooking the spectacular Havana harbour, well-served with the promised Mojitos and plates of sandwiches. By this time, several participants had to leave for other engagements, including Miguel Littin, the well-known Chilean whose exploits shooting a film in disguise in his beleaguered land are beautifully documented in Gabriel

Garcia Marquez's book *Clandestine in Chile*.

The ensuing discussion, for obvious reasons, took place in English. The Latin filmmakers were interested in co-productions. An independent Canadian producer/director pointed out that most Canadian filmmakers have trouble getting funding for Canadian films, let alone for co-productions. But unlike the Latins, we do have government funding whereas their resources are much more limited. They encouraged us to think of shooting in their countries. Typically, a committee was formed to pursue the situation further. Who knows what may come of it, a Quebec/Cuba co-production?

I attended the Ninth Annual Festival of New Latin American Cinema as an observer. It was my fourth trip to this exquisite island and as a Canadian tourist, unlikely to be my last. But I have also dreamed of filming in Cuba or other Latin countries in the hope of promoting mutually beneficial relations. How such aspirations may be concretised is difficult to discern. On the surface they seem to need our technology and resources but not necessarily ourselves as well.

What kind of working relationship is really worth pursuing? One answer is that simply to develop public awareness in Canada of the amazing and heroic struggles taking place today in Central and Latin America must be of value. This may best be achieved by encouraging distribution in Canada of Latin American films as well as trying to make Canadian films about these countries, particularly those Canada is directly or indirectly involved in.

And why not plan to attend next year's Festival of New Latin Cinema in Havana? It's an exciting and stimulating event which can provide much to reflect upon afterwards, including the prospect of another trip to Cuba in January, when there are no film screenings to distract you from going to the beach! ●

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