

# Havana 1994

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## CUBA: MAYBE NOT KICKING BUT ALIVE!

Havana - There are no taxes in Cuba. That's a constitutional guarantee. There is also no street crime to speak of, no major drug problem, and a girl can walk home alone after a movie -- often many miles -- without worry.

Of course, going home by bus would be better -- if they ran. And she'd find her way more easily if the streets were lit. In a country with no native energy source, those are the real luxuries, the ones Cuba can no longer afford. Not after the fall of the socialist block. Suddenly, Cuba is all alone out there.

Meeting Castro, the man, is another surprise. In spanking new green battledress -- he's given up smoking Cohibas, they sell without his help -- he welcomes us in his marble-columned Palacio de la Revolucion and instead of a dose of "Socialismo o Muerte", which Havana's graffiti quote him as spouting, we get what amounts to a capitalist overture: what are the chances of coproducing movies with Cuban below-the-line support, he wants to know.

Nastily, the world press calls this the Coca-Cola-Revolution, but stuck without the three-billion-dollar yearly subsidy from the former Soviet Union, making deals with the West is his only chance of giving the Cubans a decent life. If he can swing it.

Hundreds line up in front of closed restaurants -- in case they open. Hundreds at bus stops -- in case one shows up. And thousands line up for movies -- in case there is no power cut that afternoon. But there is music in the discos, lovemaking (and a lot of it) along the Malecon beachfront, economic stops are pulled for tourists, and the internationally renowned Film Festival. No power cuts for us.

Television in Latin America is not obliged by law (as it is in many countries in Europe) to subsidise feature film production. Its enormous popularity in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela -- the major producers of films in the past -- has given it a position of power making supporting gestures towards the cinema a luxury it doesn't feel it needs. In all these countries, this year, feature production is way down. In Cuba too, but for different reasons. Here it's a first-things-first syndrome.

As a result, almost all the better films at this year's Havana Film Festival, the traditional showplace for Latin-American films, had been seen previously at European festivals, including the ones which despite this fact gathered the top awards here during a ceremony at what must be the last theatre in this hemisphere to be called the Karl Marx.

Somewhat reduced in size and scope by the current economic disaster, blamed here more on the US trade embargo than on the subsidy vacuum, the festival nevertheless managed a respectable array of some forty features from Latin-American countries with others from France and Spain within a total of 345 works.

This high figure results from the inclusion of video, animation, documentaries and shorts, and the competition included best poster and best unshot script -- the most coveted trophy here because of the US \$150,000 tied to it and donated by Tele-Madrid and the Spanish Association of Film Authors. Chosen by one of the four officiating juries from sixty-six submitted treatments, the money (\$20,000 to a writer, \$130,000 towards production costs) this year went to Cuban Senel Paz for his adaptation of his own literary work *Enemigo Rumor* (*The Enemy: Rumor*) to be lensed by Cuba's old master director Tomas Gutierrez Alea.

Interestingly, this prize represents the tip of the iceberg of a major cultural movement in today's Cuba, largely spearheaded by ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute, which not only runs all of Cuban production (and this festival) but also supports painters, musicians, graphic artists and writers, and has recently won a major ideological battle against hardliners in the party structure.

Its planned merger, in May 1991, with the national TV studios and the army production arm was vehemently protested by Cuba's intellectuals, artists, writers and film directors who won out over the conservatives -- a fact virtually unheard of under the Castro regime to date. Alfredo Guevara, one of the original founders of ICAIC, removed ten years earlier under party pressure, was called back to head what must now be considered one of the most interesting ventures in the former communist world.

Havana is probably the world's first and last self-sustaining film festival. Its budget of around 280,000 Pesos is covered by anticipated spectator count approaching 300,000 paying a Peso each (officially a dollar but reputed at 30 to the dollar on the street) and this event of course benefits from hard-currency intake on a major scale from foreign visitors.

Unbelievably long lines form at all hours in front of the 17 theatres in Greater Havana projecting more films in 12 days than total number of films (60-70) released in Cuba during the year in normal distribution. Despite the 23-24 million tickets sold at the normal price of 2 Pesos (with average monthly salaries of 250 Pesos) in Cuba yearly, the festival is an eagerly awaited major social event here and a clear example of the world trend towards end-user, ticket-selling festivals retailing films to a major public with a tendency to replace "normal" theatrical distribution. Here, as elsewhere, it may eventually become necessary to find ways to channel some of the resulting revenue back to those who made the films.

TV penetration within Cuba's ten million inhabitants (two million in Havana alone) is almost total, but much of this is still in black-and-white. Dish-antenna reception, enabling viewers to "catch" US broadcasts, is now tolerated by the regime. Video is a major industry with fiction videos widely produced, often in tele-novella style. Audience sophistication, except at specialised venues, is often minimal, and even at festival screenings ill-timed audience ridicule at delicate moments is jarring. But a hunger for traditional cinema experience as a social event is obviously enormous.

Havana's film market MECLA held simultaneously at the magnificently renovated Hotel Nacional which also housed the festival headquarters did well this year with 26 countries participating and sixty buyers reported from countries as far as China and Korea besides the usual ones fishing in the Spanish-language film pool provided here by the hemisphere's main producers: Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Cuba. This year, there were larger than usual groups of films from smaller producing countries like Venezuela, Colombia, Peru and Chile. Stalls at the open-air garden site are \$1000 including NTSC-VTRs with multiple system available when needed. Trading seemed brisk but results were not divulged by MECLA's organisers.

What seems to be the most striking general characteristic of films seen here is that they never question basic tenets of social behaviour: the Catholic background to most of Latin-American film making remains a formative influence, and while there is a lot of sex (I don't remember a film without it) it's treated either as a joke or an aberration, with the family still the normal and respectable backbone.

Where extra-conjugal love is treated seriously (as in Argentina's *Un Lugar En El Mundo*) it is not allowed to triumph. At least not this year in Havana.

The US, officially boycotting the festival, was nevertheless represented by a curious group of films: *JFK*, *American Me*, *Mishima*, *Highway Patrolman* and *The Plague*, all out of competition and presumably for reasons of a "Cuban connection" in their themes. And there was a small group of Chicano movies: *Born In East LA* by Cheech Marin, *Milagro Beanfield War* by Robert Redford and Les Blank's survey of Chicano music.

The best part of the Havana experience is the spirit of the people. The recent belt-tightening seems to have created a feeling of "we're in this together", and despite the dark streets, despite the evident hunger, despite the sense of isolation in a changing world, even despite the police who keep ordinary Cubans away from the tourist hotels, the intransigent, smiling and open Cuban spirit of the people is evident everywhere and the atmosphere is highly conducive to contact and exchange among film people and others from many cultures.

## **Author Information**

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