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CUE TO MOVIES

'I Am Cuba' is dated but interesting

By Stephen Holden
NEW YORK TIMES

THE island of Cuba has never looked as fantastically exotic as it does in "I Am Cuba," a more than two-hour swatch of cinematic agitprop that aspires to be the "Potemkin" of the Cuban Communist Revolution.

Completed in 1964, during the headiest days of the romance between the Soviet Union and Cuba, this Russian-Cuban co-production is a feverish pas de deux of Eastern European soulfulness and Latin sensuality fused into an unwieldy but visually stunning burst of propaganda.

Supervised by the great Russian director Mikhail Kalatozov, who is best known for "The Cranes Are Flying," it suggests Eisenstein filtered through "La Dolce Vita" with an Afro-Cuban pulse.

"I Am Cuba" is structured like a social realist mural with five panels, each of which illustrates a different aspect of the revolution. After surveying the fleshpots of tourist Havana with a leering disapproval, it moves into the sugar cane fields, then returns to the city to follow the leftist student movement. From there it journeys to the country to show the bombing of the innocent peasants' hillside dwellings. It ends in the mountains marching with Fidel Castro's ragtag army.

Stick figures

Although the movie has a cast of hundreds, its characters are little more than stick figures on which to hang the movie's revolutionary rhetoric. The heroes include Betty (Luz Maria Collazo), an exploited Havana bar girl who lives in a seaside shack; Pedro (Jose Gallardo), an impoverished cane cutter whose land is sold out from under him; Enrique (Raul Garcia), a militant student leader; and Alberto (Sergio Corrieri), an indefatigable freedom fighter. With their shining, idealistic faces, they are picture-postcard revolutionaries working against a government run by cigar-smoking, sour-pussed monsters.

Leading the list of enemies are the fat-cat American businessmen (including one grotesque Jewish caricature) who draw lots for the favors of Havana bar girls forced by poverty into prostitution. In one of the film's most inflammatory

REVIEW

- "I Am Cuba"
- Starring Luz Maria Collazo and Jose Gallardo
- Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov
- In English and Spanish with English subtitles
- At the Castro in San Francisco
- Unrated
- ★★★½ (Good photography)

scenes, American sailors singing a jingoist anthem chase a frightened young woman through the city's deserted streets.

Threaded through the screenplay, written by the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and the Cuban novelist Carlos Farinas, is an oratorical narration by a woman representing the anguished soul of the nation.

Rhetoric escalates

"I thought your ships brought happiness," she tells the ghost of Christopher Columbus. "Ships took my sugar and left me in tears." The rhetoric escalates, as she describes the trunks of palm trees filled with blood and finally exhorts the nation's farmers to exchange their tools for rifles. "You are firing at the past," she declares. "You are firing to protect your future."

What makes "I Am Cuba" much more than a relic of Communist kitsch is Sergei Urusevsky's visionary cinematography.

The film's high-contrast black-and-white photography, which renders palm trees and sugar cane fields a searing white against an inky sky, illustrates the revolution's explosive polarities and burning passions.

Enhanced surrealism

The frequent use of a distorting wide-angle lens enhances the surrealism, lending the scenes of Havana nightlife an ominous, fishbowl artificiality. In a spectacular sequence set on the deck of a luxury hotel, the camera follows bikini-clad tourists from poolside to underwater.

The influence of new-wave cinema is felt in several scenes shot



Luisa Maria Jimenez portrays Teresa and Mario Gonzalez Broche plays Pablo in director Mikhail Kalatozov's "I Am Cuba."

with a hand-held camera. In a scene that recalls Fellini's "La Dolce Vita," the camera frantically gyrates on the dance floor of a fancy nightclub. Tame by contemporary standards, these depictions of capitalist decadence remind one that nothing looks more dated than yesterday's depravity.

Urusevsky's photography ennobles the revolutionaries by gazing up at them like living statues. As student revolutionaries are gassed and shot at by henchmen of the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista,

they become mythological figures advancing heroically through parting veils of smoke. The film's relentless monumentalizing of heroes and villains may be visually impressive, but it eventually becomes wearying.

"I Am Cuba" is finally more than just a celebration of a revolution. It is a dream of life in which everything is reduced to black and white. Or as the rhetoric used to go, you are either part of the problem or part of the solution. Nothing was ever quite that simple.