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"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS"

"Reinaldo lived on the outside of society, and that's a subject I'm familiar with," says New York artist-turned-director Julian Schnabel, about the subject of **"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS,"** his follow-up film to the acclaimed **"BASQUIAT"**--also an artist's biography, of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Cuban-born writer Reinaldo Arenas was one of the major talents to have emerged from the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s, yet he provoked the Castro regime as both a political dissident and an openly gay man, and spent the majority of his pre-American years harassed, imprisoned and physically abused. Born in rural Cuba, he was initially pro-Castro, and rose to international acclaim--and received an official literary award in Havana--with the publication of his first novel, *"Singing in the Well."* He fell into disgrace with his second novel, *"The Ill-fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando"*--interpreted as an anti-communist treatise--and was all the more persecuted because the work was smuggled out of Cuba and published abroad.

The novel from which Schnabel adapted **"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS"** is Arenas' posthumously published autobiography, written after he had come to America in 1980 through the Mariel boatlift escape, and lived in Manhattan with AIDS. The arc of Arenas' story, in the film, ends with the writer's suicide exactly a decade ago, at the age of 47.

"It's an impressionist view of Reinaldo's life," says Schnabel, whose acclaim as an artist pre-films was precipitated by portraits he provocatively created from smashed plates. **"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS"** captures the style and flavor of Arenas' writing, with brief, intensely

vivid scenes that evoke a succession of remembrances. Spanish actor Javier Bardem plays Reinaldo, in a star-making performance--embodying both the artist's strength and vulnerability.

"His whole life is like a fuga--an escape," says Schnabel. "His reward (for success) was becoming a fugitive in his own country... and I don't think he found paradise in the U.S. either." Though Schnabel used Mexico locations as substitute for Cuba, the movie in fact includes footage of contemporary Havana. "Schnabel won't say how it was obtained," notes an Associated Press story.

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"BEFORE NIGHT FALLS" was published in Spain in 1992. The English translation was published in the U.S. by Viking Press the following year, and was chosen by The New York Times as one of the 13 best new books of the year.

"I never thought that I'd get the rights. But I contacted Reinaldo's agent Tom Colchie in 1997 and he organized a screening of **'BASQUIAT'** for the directors of the Arenas' estate," Schnabel told a reporter in late summer. He also called Lazaro Gomez Carriles, the writer's friend and one of his heirs, who gave the project his blessing. Schnabel wrote the screenplay with Gomez Carriles and Cunningham O'Keefe, and began filming last August. Filming ended in New York in November.

Noted iconoclastic actors Sean Penn and Johnny Depp also appear in cameo roles in the film. Both are old friends of the director, and share his fascination with the brilliant, intense tormented Cuban artist.

Says Schnabel: "Reinaldo was able to turn his suffering into beauty." ■