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Miramax

VLADIMIR CRUZ is a college student transformed by a friendship in "Strawberry and Chocolate."

'Strawberry and Chocolate' rates two scoops on the flavor meter

By PAUL FREEMAN
Correspondent

Individuality is a rarity, particularly in repressed environments. But it's something to strive for, as are tolerance and understanding. In the new Cuban film "Strawberry and Chocolate," all three precious commodities are celebrated.

In this affecting comedy-drama, two men form a deep, unusual bond. David (Vladimir Cruz), a naive university student, is forlorn. His fiancée, seeking instant security, has just married another man.

At a cafe, he is approached by Diego (Jorge Perugorria). David later claims he knew immediately that Diego was gay because he ordered strawberry ice cream instead of chocolate. Diego, a bit older and more sophisticated, lures David back to his apartment, dangling the possibility of forbidden books.

Though he is repelled and skittish, David is also intrigued. Diego has access to a much broader world. But Diego flaunts his effeminate side and his clumsy seduction attempts send David stomping away.

The two aren't different only in terms of sexual preference. David is an ardent Communist, always ready to steadfastly defend the system. Diego rails against it, regardless of what troubles his counterrevolutionary attitudes cause him.

David's narrow-minded, self-righteous school friend, Miguel, views Diego as a threat to the status quo, both in terms of politics and morality. This judgmental student convinces David to spy on Diego. Surely there will be no difficulty in accumulating incriminating evidence.

With this negative intent, David returns to Diego's place. But the more time he spends with the man, the more he glimpses beneath the superficial, beyond the stereotypical. Diego is a caring, compassionate man who loves his country and sings the praises of beautiful Havana. Nevertheless, he laments the general state of mind in which any sort of difference in thought, in behavior, is not tolerated.

He opens David's eyes and his mind. A defender of the arts, he nurtures the younger man's budding writing talent. Diego asserts that art, unlike newspapers, radio

Review

What: "Strawberry and Chocolate"

Starring: Vladimir Cruz, Jorge Perugorria, Mirta Ibarra

Rating: R

Where: Opens today at the Gateway in S.F. and the Shattuck in Berkeley

Star rating: ★★★ out of ★★★★★

and television, must not be propaganda. It must be a wellspring of emotion and ideas.

While feeling the pain of unrequited love for the lad, he even fixes David up with a promiscuous, suicidal, yet cheery and good-hearted neighbor woman.

David benefits greatly from his platonic, but profound relationship with Diego. He comes to comprehend Diego's unique gifts, his principles and his inner strength. Eventually, he's even willing to be seen in public with the gay man, thus breaking one of his original rules for the friendship.

Based on the short story "The Wolf, The Forest and the New Man," this touching tale of friendship has been effectively directed by Tomas Gutierrez Alea, one of Cuba's top directors.

It's the top-notch performance by Perugorria as Diego that gives the film most of its humor and poignancy. When we first meet the character, he seems to be one-dimensional, a standard portrayal of a flamboyant gay fellow. But with sensitivity and insight, Perugorria slowly, believably brings more and more of this fascinating man into focus. It's a rich and memorable portrait.

Cruz is less charismatic, but remains credible throughout, even in the course of the character's dramatic transformation.

As Nancy, the deceptively fragile neighbor, Mirta Ibarra brings an attractive energy to the piece. In her casual prayers, she reveals an ever increasing desperation that's related to her age and sullied reputation.

All three of these characters are worth knowing. The film is not about homosexuality, nor is it solely about Castro's Cuba. It's about accepting those who are different from us and finding value in their differences.