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Fresh looks at Cuba in the Los Angeles Film Festival

A quartet of films depict a country in the midst of political and cultural soul-searching.

By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

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In the blithe romantic comedy "Habana Eva," playing [Friday and Saturday at the Los Angeles Film Festival](#), the frisky, young Cuban heroine faces several thorny choices.

Should she stand by her loyal-but-lethargic Cuban boyfriend, or bed down with a rich, dashing Venezuelan photographer? Stick with her seamstress job in a state-run factory, or take the plunge into entrepreneurial capitalism by becoming a fashion designer? Hold fast to the old revolutionary ideals, or embrace the new spirit of globalization that's encroaching on Cuba like the waves pounding the Malecon sea wall?

Her disarming implied response to some of these dilemmas — "Well, why not both?" — won't satisfy Marxist intellectuals or haters of Fidel Castro. But it expresses a certain ambivalent affection toward Cuba's past, as well as a tentative hopefulness about its post-Castro future, that can be glimpsed to varying degrees in all four films in the festival's "International Spotlight: Cuba" series.

Although many Americans still see Cuba through the lens of Cold War politics, these films depict a country in the midst of political and cultural soul-searching, in ways that don't adhere to any one party line.

"I'm hoping that this kind of collection of films will help beat down some of that monolithic way of looking at things," said David Ansen, the festival's artistic director, who scouted for films at last winter's Havana Film Festival with an L.A. delegation that included director Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal ("The Hurt Locker").

Partly due to long-standing trade restrictions between the two countries, Ansen said, Cuban films

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rarely are shown in the United States, apart from festivals. But a recent easing by the Obama administration of rules governing U.S.-Cuba cultural exchanges could change that in coming years.

Although the L.A. Film Festival's producer, Film Independent, had wanted to tap into Cuba's vibrant film culture for some time, Ansen said, this year it got a boost by partnering with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which this summer is hosting an exhibition of Cuban movie posters. All these events are part of "¡Sí Cuba! SoCal," a multi-venue Southern California festival celebrating Cuban culture with art, film, dance and conversations.

One film in particular makes the case for the United States and Cuba to put aside their decades-long hostility and mistrust. That thought animates Estela Bravo's 57-minute documentary "Operation Peter Pan: Flying Back to Cuba," a moving account of a little-known Cold War chapter.

In 1961 and 1962, an estimated 15,000 Cuban children were sent by their parents to the United States to shield them from the communist takeover. Among the program's backers were the U.S. State Department, the Roman Catholic Church and possibly the CIA.

"Children are the most vulnerable, and are caught up in whatever happens," said Bravo, whose previous documentaries include a controversially laudatory portrait of Castro and a short film about children who went missing during Argentina's Dirty War of the 1970s and early '80s.

In her new film, Bravo interviews several now-middle-age Peter Pans, who were raised in the United States, and follows their first visit back to Cuba in September 2009. The movie's grown-up subjects speak about their divided loyalties and being stranded in broken families between two countries, cultures and political systems. As one puts it, "I always say I left Cuba, but Cuba never left me."

By far the series' bleakest depiction of life in post-Cold War Cuba is "Ticket to Paradise," set in 1993, during the euphemistically named "special period" when Castro and his people were left to fend for themselves after their key economic and military patron, the Soviet Union, collapsed.

In director Gerardo Chijona's queasy romantic drama, a young country girl fleeing her sexually abusive father falls in with a group of homeless teenagers in Havana. She gets dragged into a scenario that entails ample doses of sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and petty crime, menaced by the threat of AIDS but filled with the adrenaline rush of free will.

By contrast, Fernando Pérez's "Suite Habana" (made in 2003) is a sublime, virtually wordless tone poem about a day in the lives of 10 ordinary Cubans — a railway worker, a peanut vendor, a father nurturing his son who has Down syndrome — and the emotional and spiritual bounty that sustains them amid relentless material deprivation.

Two far more upbeat assessments of whether Cuba can resolve its contradictions can be found in "Habana Eva," by Venezuelan director Fina Torres, and in the documentary "Unfinished Spaces." Although not part of "Spotlight: Cuba" because its director-producers, Alys Nahmias and Benjamin Murray, are U.S. filmmakers, "Unfinished Spaces" is being screened at the festival on Friday and Saturday.

Leapfrogging between past and present, while deftly mixing contemporary and archival footage, "Unfinished Spaces" tells the remarkable story of how in the early 1960s Castro enlisted three visionary architects to construct a Cuban National Art Schools complex.

But before the project could be completed, Cuba's revolution became Sovietized and militarized, leading Che Guevara and others to denounce the new school's sensuous architecture and its pleasure-seeking student life as decadent and counter-revolutionary. Many additional plot turns ensue as the film examines 40-plus years of Cuban history through its singular prism.

Nahmias and Murray, who are both 32 and met as classmates at New York University, said they wanted their film to go beyond stereotypes of Cuba that either "romanticize" or "vilify" its government.

"That was what drew me in, knowing there had to be something more," Nahmias said. "The first couple of trips, I fell in love with Cuba. The more I've gone there, I think I've seen a lot of harsh realities. But I'm still in love with it."

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