

## Strawberry and Chocolate

The ideological baggage almost any American carries regarding Castro's Cuba is so weighty that it is well-nigh impossible to objectively judge any aesthetic product from that island. Such a product--like a movie--is almost inevitably assessed and gauged against how much it hews to a Castro line or where it must be calibrated on the "dissident" scale. Is it propaganda or protest?--with little choice offered in between.

Such a dilemma (if that's what it is) is presented with the new film from Cuba *Strawberry and Chocolate*. Its director, Tomas Gutierrez Alea, one of his country's most prominent directors, aims at depicting an intricate and balanced view of a complex relationship between two men, yet, perhaps inevitably, he can't help his characters from becoming in part symbols of the political struggle which permeates Cuba. At best, he does spark some real human interest and give us a glimpse of a society made the more exotic by our national disassociation from it.

First of all, be aware that this Spanish-language motion picture has no lovingly photographed recipes and delicate fantasy, like that other *Chocolate* movie. A pre-credit sequence introduces us to Havana 1979 and to one of the film's protagonists, David (Vladimir Cruz), a young university student who loses his beloved to another fellow with better pecuniary prospects. The film's opening shows a disgruntled David sullenly scarfing chocolate ice cream at an outdoor cafe, when he is gently accosted by a rather flaming gay, Diego (Jorge Perrugoria), who extols the virtues of strawberry, the "only good thing in this country."

Diego invites David up to his apartment on the pretext of showing the latter a photo taken of him in a university play. David, while a straight arrow Castroite, is also a closet aesthete who is fascinated by Diego's digs, an exotic and decadent lair, littered with religious sculpture, outré artifacts, banned literature, and Johnnie Walker Red. Diego's cultural tastes are high-flown--the ballet, Cafavy and John Donne, vintage Maria Callas records (like Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*)--and they intrigue David, who--though he is disgusted at the thought of sex with Diego--wants to return to sample this new-found land.

David tells his *macho* roommate Miguel (Francisco Gatorno) about the relationship, who urges him to spy on Diego so he can be turned over to the authorities as a subversive. He also gets to know Nancy (Mirta Ibarra), Diego's suicidal neighbor and friend, who is supposed to represent the government's political oversight function (*Vigilanza*), but who has a soft spot for Diego and indulges him. Most of the film is taken up with David's discovery of Diego's complexity while he is supposedly entrapping him. They talk earnestly, they parry often, they argue politics, but David keeps learning from Diego, who never lies to him.

Tenuous ties of attachment start to grow. Diego, to save him embarrassment, agrees not to recognize David in the street so as not to compromise him, yet he is harsh in his judgements of David's tentative short stories. Diego, in cahoots with Nancy, even sets up David's sweet deflowering with the agreeable housemate. It all must end, however, as Diego, who has been angling to find a way to get out, finally makes a connection with a foreign embassy for asylum. At their last rendezvous at the outdoor

cafe, David, who has come to the realization that “everybody has a right to be themselves,” at last tastes strawberry.

Tomas Gutierrez Alea came of film-making age with the Cuban Revolution (his first feature was completed in 1962) and was a founding member of ICAIC, the institute which took over the Cuban film industry when Fidel came to power. He gained a critical reputation outside the island more than 25 years ago with a black satire, *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966), and a thoughtful, wistful study of an isolated intellectual, *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), the Cuban cinema’s one great international success. While he has had fallow periods as a director, he has never been “suppressed” by the regime but has continued to produce at a fitful pace. Now 66, Gutierrez Alea seems to be stock taking. Interviewed about *Strawberry and Chocolate*, he says the film is about tolerance--or rather the lack of it--within current Cuban society: “our inability to accept others who are different from ourselves.” He added that the revolution has made mistakes, and “It’s time for a change.” Sometimes these theses come out too baldly in the film, especially when Diego agonizes about his station in Cuban society or when one-note Miguel harps on getting the “queer.”

The film is about personal secrets: Diego, clandestinely trying to escape his beloved Havana; David, hiding his literary and aesthetic desires under a coarse Marxism; Nancy, holding privately to her saints and prayers in the secular state. The best of the film is in how these secrets are gradually revealed to the other characters and how this slowly changes them. No love story, this film is really about the gradual unfolding of *affections*. Jorge Perrugoria has a tough task in coming on early as a mincing, Oscar-Wildish stereotype of a gay who must then reveal facets and dimensions that make his Diego a fully-rounded being. He fundamentally achieves this. As David, Vladimir Cruz has an easier job portraying the bewildered young man opening to a wider world, and, while he can sometimes seem inscrutable under his cantilevered brows, he is effective in manifesting a growing maturity. Nancy, as played by Mirta Ibarra (Gutierrez Alea’s wife, who has appeared in several of his films), is touching and *simpatica* as a sassy but basically unworldly person who has sound instincts about the worth of people.

Since Cuban films are about as common as a cool Washington summer, it might behoove adventurous filmgoers to check out *Strawberry and Chocolate* just to see what Havana (circa 1979) looks like. It’s overall look, however, is dominated by Diego’s eclectic apartment, a cultural melange lovingly shot by Gutierrez Alea’s longtime cinematographer Mario Garcia Joya. One gets the impression that the director himself, clearly a broadly cultured man, wishes more of his compatriots could share in its quirky possibilities. One wishes they could too.

(“*Strawberry and Chocolate*” is rated “R” for adult themes and Spanish profanity.)

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