

Race: Voyage to the Heart of Tragedy

Chronicle of a Long-Awaited Premiere

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A dozen of us members of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration (CIR) punctually arrived at the December 10th, 2008, meeting, sixty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was issued. This was happening at the same time Havana's large cinemas were languishing as they awaited the arrival of a currently morose, unmotivated public for the New Latin American Cinema Festival. But theater number one of the Infanta Multiplex (with its 185 seats) hosted not only the premiere of many other excellent films but also the debut of the documentary "Race," young Cuban filmmaker Eric Corvalán's first film.

The thirty-five minute long reel, produced by Ediciones DELFIN, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, and FAMCA (Foundation for Alternative Forms of Audiovisual Communication), had gen-

erated great expectations, given the delicate and complex nature of its topic. But the main reason for this was its stark, consistent, and transparent treatment of a phenomenon with significant repercussions for the present and future of the Cuban nation, for a populace that for so long has been silenced by the elites, and for those with power or vested interests, who have refused to acknowledge the true diversity of the largest of the Antilles with a real humanistic spirit. The screening room soon became too small for all the anxious spectators. Moments after the program started, almost all the attendees ended up outside, including the filmmaker himself. It took them quite a bit of effort to find stairs and aisles in the narrow room so they could finish readying the place for the first public debut of the much-awaited film.

The truth before anything else

A few representatives of the common folk, as well as various academics, intellectuals, and renown artists made appearances in this documentary; they shared impressions, life experiences, analyses, and judgments about just how old and current the problem of racism is in Cuba. Our perceptions about each other became much more complicated, our co-existence much more difficult, as a result of the society that was created by the confluence of diverse ethnic and cultural components.

From a conceptual and institutional point of view, Cubans are all the same, or equal in all the rhetoric and expressed desires. But, as those interviewed in the film shared in one way or another, the dominant sector's immovable hegemony, and the disdain for and manipulation of our legacy and manifestations of 'Africanness' in the nation's culture and character, have contributed to validating and promoting the inequality, exclusion, and marginalization that conspire against the normal integration of Cuba as a modern and pluralistic nation.

It has not been possible for the government's structures and ideology to reverse the natural and understandable historical disadvantages that plague Cuba's African descendants. Old taboos, guilty omissions, and imposed silences serve to deepen fractures that have turned the race problem into an enormous challenge for the immediate future.

The film's interviewees clearly refer to the fact that patterns and behaviors that project negative and disdainful images of blacks into the social and aesthetic imaginary prevail. These exclusionary behaviors validate and promote the thinking and treatment that for all our history have condemned

Cuba's African descendants to marginality; they have always been relegated to the geographic, economic, cultural and institutional periphery.

Persistent distortions receive special attention in this documentary; these include official history's propensity for denying the actions, thoughts, and contributions of black Cubans the recognition they deserve. This situation is not unlike the current one, in which black Cubans are absent from spaces that would afford them the ability to symbolically, artistically express themselves, and give them access to the media. This all serves to make them further invisible and promotes disdainful stereotypes about an important part of the population that makes up Cuban society.

The documentary audience applauded when Doctor Esteban Morales shared his opinions in the film. He is a renowned academic, a specialist in U.S. history, politics, and economics: he ascribes to the government's positions and proposals. What he said in the documentary, in a well-organized and structured presentation, was unlike anything he has said before: what he shared on the subject was less critical and vaguer than usual. He focused on the shortcomings and gaps that persist in our development as an ethnically and culturally pluralistic nation; he also talked about how the effects of those distortions abound in our new forms of inequality and imbalance.

Hearing a wellknown representative of the government's interests and positions admit that we continue living in a hegemonically white society, and that what society continues to value, and what educational programs keep reproducing has just as much impact as seeing specialist Elizabeth Concepción "dissertate" with chilling tranquility about the physical disadvantages that



practically invalidate blacks and mestizo from participating in classical ballet. This was just seconds after the great Carlos Acosta leapt and nearly levitated past the scenery on the movie screen.

The documentary's approaches and assessments reconfirm what is going on in Cuban society, and the need there is for us to initiate the most open, transparent, unprejudiced, and extended debate about the causes, historical and structural essence of the social fractures and inequalities from which we suffer. The spirit and reaction of those who attended the premiere reveals the enormous uneasiness with which large sectors of society are clamoring for the silence on a subject that concerns everyone and requires thorough and valiant analysis to be shattered.

Many interested parties and specialists who saw the premiere have been advocating for its run to be extended; their goal is for everyone to see it, share their ideas and assessments, and, supposedly, contribute to

this very necessary and delayed debate. Yet, more than two months after the film's debut, "Raza" has been shown only a few times, in highly controlled spaces, without any prior promotional publicity. It would seem that officialdom is not keen on disseminating the documentary; this makes one think that the authorities have not, perhaps, fully accepted this problem's dimensions, and also lack the sensitivity and responsibility with which to nurture the political will necessary to confront this delicate, critical, and humanely important topic.

We should confide that the diffusion of and impact that "Raza" is beginning to have abroad, and in its inclusion in local, community film programs that the CIR is going to start hosting all around the country, can convince the authorities that these problems cannot be faced by hiding or manipulating them. This documentary, and the debate on the race issue in Cuba, have to stop being an unfulfilled promise and delayed necessity.