HOLLYWOOD GOES HAVANA

By Merle Linda Wolin

In Hollywood these days it's chic to go to Cuba. Many of America's brightest filmmakers, including Oliver Stone, Sidney Pollack, and Spike Lee, have trekked to the Havana Film Festival. Others, such as Francis Coppola, Robert Redford, and George Lucas, have gone to lecture and to teach at an internationally known film foundation and school headed by Gabriel García Márquez, the celebrated Colombian writer.

Before I visited Cuba last spring I heard U.S. filmmakers praise the innovative nature of the project, emphasizing that the foundation and school didn't have anything to do with Cuba; they just happen to *be* in Cuba. I was prepared to be surprised. But after interviews with everyone from García Márquez to his former assistant at the school (who defected to the United States in 1988) to Hollywood celebrities, including Redford, it became clear that the Cubans and their friends are using a cultural project to legitimize one of the last bastions of Stalinist rule—and then roping in Hollywood to do the p.r.

The Foundation for New Latin American Cinema, the school's parent organization, was founded in April 1985 in Havana by activist Latin American *cineastes* with close ties to Cuba. New Latin American Cinema refers to what the *cineastes*, in the little-known first issue of their magazine of the same name, define as the "cinematographies of the continent," which are "sustained by the principles of sovereignty and unity against the principal enemy" (i.e., the United States). Shortly after the foundation was conceived, García Márquez, one of Castro's closest friends, became its president. Legally, contrary to what many in Hollywood have been led to believe, the project is purely Cuban. The foundation's charter states that the organization is "subject to the Civil Code, the laws, and the concordant dispositions of the Republic of Cuba, where it officially resides. . . ." Its goals are to promote all aspects of what it considers progressive filmmaking in Latin America, from production to distribution to conservation. To that end, it supports numerous film-related projects, including an exchange program with Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in Utah.

The financial structure has proved key to the project's success. Castro pays for the land, buildings, daily maintenance costs, the salaries of the more than 100 Cuban employees, including teachers, and a small allowance for each of the 160 full-time students and the approximately 300 part-time students. Lola Calviño, the school's chief administrator, said the annual peso budget amounts to about $2.3 million. Castro personally hands her the school's monthly allowance. Everything else in the project's budget, though—nearly all the items that must be paid for in hard currency, such as film equipment, airplane tickets, salaries for foreign instructors, etc.—must be raised outside Cuba by García Márquez and the foundation.

The list of foreign contributors is impressive. Redford, apparently unfazed by the prohibitions of the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, raised more than $25,000 for the school in 1988 at a dinner party he gave for García Márquez in his Malibu home. García Márquez has donated more than $250,000 in book royalties, along with other large, unspecified sums, according to Cuban Alquimia Peña, the foundation's executive director. Numerous Latin American writers and directors have donated film or book royalties; UNESCO has donated more than $60,000 toward plane tickets; France has donated cameras, editing tables, and video equipment; Spain has given spare parts; universities in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Nicaragua have lent teachers; the Soviet Union has donated still cameras and film; Sundance has contributed workshop instructors; and the Pan African Film Federation has paid for student travel.

The school is located in the countryside outside Havana. Its three-year undergraduate program offers students, who come from all over the world but largely from Latin America, the standard courses needed to learn the artistic and technical skills of filmmaking, such as editing, directing, and sound. But it goes further than even some of its more distinguished rivals in the United States, by giving each student equal opportunity to make films and not forcing them to compete for scarce resources.

Besides García Márquez, a host of professionals from the United States, Latin America, and Europe have gone there to teach. From Hollywood alone, they include Coppola, who gave a workshop on screenwriting; Lucas, who taught students about special effects; Oscar-winning producer Jonathan Sanger (*Frances*, *The Elephant Man*), who worked with students on script market-

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ability; and, through the Sundance exchange program, director Tim Hunter (*River's Edge*) and writer Tom Rickman (*Coal Miner's Daughter*).

During my visit to the school I asked Argentine Hernan Invernizi, the school's press officer, to show me a sampling of the fifty-nine student documentaries made the previous year, including three films that had been highly controversial among the Cuban staff—one about homosexuality in Cuba, another about what will happen when Castro dies, and the third about the furtive lives of Havana's heavy-metal rockers. He played a tape of ten films for me, plus a promotional video about the school. The films were original and well done—one about the traditional lives of Chinese immigrants in Havana, another about a group of artists striving to express themselves in modern terms. But two of the controversial films were missing—the one about Castro's death, and the one on punk rockers. (The film on homosexuality, which was included, was surprisingly pro-Castro, explaining that discrimination against gays exists *Not Because Fidel Says So*, the title of the film, but because Cuban culture is deeply homophobic.) When asked what happened to the other films, Invernizi replied disingenuously: "They weren't there? Oh, well. They weren't that good anyway."

Another foreign staff member showed me *If Fidel Dies*, which he claimed was the most offensive to Cuban officials and came close to being banned. But the film seemed to reflect, if anything, an unquestioning acceptance of Castro and his more than thirty-year rule. When asked about the controversy, Calviño denied the Cubans considered prohibiting the film, though she explained they were extremely upset that a student "would touch on the theme of Fidel's death." "He's such a beloved person," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "Personally, I don't want to think about the subject, much less work on it."

So what happened to the films on the tape? Since a cornerstone of the school's international acclaim is that Cuba maintains a strict hands-off policy toward all school activities (students can watch films there that are prohibited in Cuba and can read books and periodicals not imported for the general population), officials wanted me to believe the films were omitted accidentally. But the Castro film was also missing from the school's annual catalog, as was a description of the film on homosexuality. What's more, some of Latin America's and Spain's best filmmakers, including Hector Babenco (*Kiss of the Spider Woman, Ironweed*), Pedro Almodóvar (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*), and Academy Award-winning cinematographer Nestor Almendros (*Days of Heaven, Kramer vs. Kramer*), are routinely excluded from the school for either cultural or political nonconformity with Cuba. (All the films of Babenco and Almodóvar are banned in Cuba. Almendros's documentaries on human rights in Cuba are prohibited, and though his Hollywood work is screened, his name is often snipped from the credits.)

Calviño says the students tend to be "politically inclined" toward Cuba. Even so, how do they feel about being granted freedoms systematically denied just outside the gates? The responses ranged from ingenuous to cynical. One, however, was refreshingly honest. "I didn't have another way of studying with people like García Márquez, with Redford, or with Sanger," lamented Maria Navaro, a Mexican director who participated in workshops in Cuba and at Sundance. "Sure, it's very contradictory and ironic to do it in Cuba. . . . But in my country, I didn't have the educational possibilities with such people as I had there. And without them, I wouldn't have been able to do my film."

On the last day of my visit, I spoke with García Márquez, Gabo, as he is called. Calviño was present, and a student recorded the conversation. García Márquez spoke eloquently about film and its transcendent power, revealing a long-held passion to use the medium to transform Latin American—and American—political life. "You're going to think this is hogwash," he said. "But everything I've ever done, all the books I've written, everything I've done in this life, I did to be able to make movies."

In 1953 García Márquez became Colombia's first film critic at *El Espectador*, a Bogotá daily, and later studied filmmaking in Italy. There he became friends with Argentine Fernando Birri, now the film school's director, and several Cubans, including Julio García Espinosa, head of the Cuban Film Institute, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Cuba's pre-eminent director (*Memories of Underdevelopment, Death of a Bureaucrat*). After his studies he went to Mexico. He had already written two books but was determined to break into movies because of their power to reach millions and because cinema, in his opinion, is a more complete creative medium. He got off to a slow start. His scripts and story ideas were always rejected, he said, and he was told repeatedly to forget filmmaking because his ideas would never reach people. "When they told me this," he recalled, "I pulled together all the stories they didn't want, tied them together, and wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*."

His experience with literature brought him back to film. He explained that when he first started writing, few people read Latin American novels. His first two books sold only about 700 copies each. But with the publication in 1965 of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Latin Americans in huge numbers started to read and appreciate their own novelists. North Americans and Europeans soon followed suit. "And today," he noted, "we're in the world."

Now García Márquez wants to duplicate that success with Latin American film. "Once we conquer our own audiences, our own markets, our films will be universal . . . ," he said. "The great power of Latin America . . . is its culture. The United States spends an enormous amount of money trying to penetrate culturally in Latin America. We don't spend a dime trying to penetrate culturally, yet we're changing the United States. . . . We're changing the language, the food, the music, a way of being," he said. "We're changing you into a Latin country. It's already happening in Miami, in New York, in Los

Angeles, in the entire South. . . . What's more, [Latin American] culture is penetrating deep into the home, entering through television. We're getting in. Be careful. We've got you totally surrounded." García Márquez continued, saying he asks his political friends: "Why are you fighting with the United States if we're already winning? In our camp we'll never be able to be imperialists in the United States. . . . In fact, we have to impede you from doing this to us. So if movies are a sensational, mass cultural factor in all this, why should we stop it? And if I have the possibility of helping, with my experience in literature, why wouldn't I do it?"

Finally, García Márquez spoke about his close relationship with Redford and Coppola and their staffs. "Despite all the problems they have with the immigration service to come here, they still do it," he said. "They're helping us. We're resolving problems." (Redford and Coppola have been investigated by the CIA and the Treasury Department for possibly violating the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, in effect since 1962, but no charges have been brought.)

At the end of the conversation, I decided to hold off asking García Márquez the tough political questions until he was home again in Mexico City in several weeks. With Calviño present—whom diplomats in Havana had told me doubles as a security agent—I didn't want to push my luck. Once in Mexico, however, García Márquez's assistant told me he would only continue the interview after the movie magazine *Premiere*, for which I was on assignment, paid out $10,000 and deposited the money in the foundation's account in Cuba.

Later, on the phone, García Márquez defended his wily demand by saying that television stations in England, Italy, and Germany had paid him for interviews in the past and that was one way he raised money for the foundation. When I said that U.S. publications regard such payments as unethical, he replied, "I consider myself a man more distinguished in ethics than in literature." As for the political implications of the film project in Cuba, he said flatly: "I won't respond to the political questions."

The film school and the role Hollywood plays were clearly assessed by Antoñio Valle Vallejo, García Márquez's former personal assistant at the school who defected to the United States while attending the Cartagena Film Festival. Valle, thirty-three, a former history and philosophy professor at the University of Havana who wrote film criticism on the side, claims the school is a thoroughly Cuban propaganda operation. Its principal objective, he says, is to use the film project to expand the Cuban political system in Latin America while improving the country's image in the world: "Only secondarily is the school about creating a Latin American cinema."

For the year and a half that Valle worked at the school, he was privy to many conversations with García Márquez, Castro, Peña, Calviño, and her husband, Film Institute director García Espinosa, among others. "They were all very clear about how to use art—film—to achieve their political objectives," he said. Valle also confirmed what diplomats had claimed: that nearly all the Cubans at the school and foundation—from top administrators like Peña and Calviño to secretaries and maintenance personnel—are civilian officials of the Interior Ministry, positioned at the school and foundation to "protect and promote Cuban interests." "It's cultural politics," he said, "which serve to export their ideology through art. And in one way or another, all the foreigners who pass through the school or the workshops leave with an image of Cuba, prefabricated."

When the subject turned to Hollywood, Valle made it clear how American filmmakers fit into Cuba's overall political design. To illustrate, he recounted how his former colleagues had spoken for months about getting Redford to Cuba. They figured that because of the star's interest in Latin American film, he would be "the most appropriate person to penetrate Hollywood." According to Valle, Castro, García Márquez, and others wanted to involve Redford in the school primarily to pave the way for his involvement in other Cuban cinematic ventures, such as possible Cuba-Hollywood co-productions. "The school is the hook for Hollywood," said Valle, "and in this case, Redford's the fish." Valle said his colleagues believed that through Redford they could accomplish several political objectives at once: circumvent the U.S. blockade; gain whatever economic, political, and social advantages such a relationship might produce; and improve the country's image abroad. The idea of using the respected celebrity to improve Cuba's image was particularly appealing. "He was considered perfect," recalled Valle, "because he's a star not from just any cinema, but from the *American* cinema, Cuba's declared enemy."

Redford's April 1988 visit to Cuba evidently went off without a hitch. He gave a speech at the school; visited top officials at the Film Institute; spoke with García Márquez about working together on a remake of *Walker*, director Alex Cox's story of the nineteenth-century American adventurer who briefly took over Nicaragua; tried unsuccessfully to buy the film rights to García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*; discussed shooting part of his upcoming film *Havana* in Cuba (the State Department later nixed the idea); and was fêted by García Márquez and Castro.

A farewell dinner for Redford was held in García Márquez's elegant mansion in Havana. Some twenty guests feasted on lobster, rum, imported whiskey, and wine. Fidel showed up around 11. He chatted with Redford, and the two evidently got on. Meanwhile, Valle said, Peña, Calviño, and García Espinosa—and later, García Márquez—congratulated themselves for having finally "conquered Redford." (After the visit Sundance indeed deepened its commitment to a cultural exchange with the foundation.)

So what does Hollywood have to say about these revelations? Coppola and Lucas declined to respond. (One of Coppola's close associates, however, said: "Francis doesn't see what we see. In Cuba he has a limo, servants, rum, he's smothered with affection. . . . And he thinks

it's better to have contact with the Cubans than not.") Sanger said he had been impressed by the school, by the "people I met and their sincere desire to make movies that move the world, which is what I want to do." But he claimed he wasn't aware of any behind-the-scenes politics or the human rights situation. "If I would have felt that my trip was an endorsement of Castro's regime, if I knew enough about his public policy, I might have had second thoughts about it," he said.

Redford took a more guarded approach. He talked about his interest in Latin American culture, and explained he had contacted García Márquez first—long before his trip to Cuba—to ask him to participate in Sundance's Latin America program. The program, the institute's largest, was designed to help American filmmakers learn about the films and other arts of Latin America. "From the beginning, what we wanted from García Márquez is his storytelling ability," said Redford. "I also knew of his interest in film and realized he could help us connect with or identify Latin American filmmakers we could then invite to this country."

But getting García Márquez to Sundance wasn't easy. Redford said the author wouldn't accept his invitation until the State Department agreed to lift travel restrictions on his entry visa, imposed years ago under the infamous McCarran-Walter Act because of García Márquez's close associations with the Cuban government. So Redford went to Washington and lobbied two friends, Senators Bill Bradley of New Jersey and Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York. The restrictions were lifted.

Then the ball started rolling. García Márquez and his wife, Mercedes, visited Sundance for the first time in January 1988. After that, Redford accepted García Márquez's invitation to visit Cuba and the school. In November Redford held his fund-raiser for García Márquez and the school in Malibu. And in January 1989 Redford's U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah, screened García Márquez's *Difficult Love* series—six films based on García Márquez stories and co-written by the Nobel laureate himself—and the Latin American program was launched.

When Redford was asked how he felt about working in a totalitarian country, he said he found that particular part of it "disturbing," but that he found it "hopeful that freedom of expression exists in the school. That's a positive sign. I am puzzled they would give freedoms to some and not to others." He also noted that it's a "heartbreaking irony" that Cubans are in jail for their beliefs and for artistic expression, while people in the school are allowed complete freedom. "But I don't tie the school and Latin American film so much to the country," he said. "I treat the school as a satellite operation. Cuba doesn't interest me."

When told that the foundation and school might be propaganda fronts for Cuba and that he perhaps is being used, Redford seemed shaken. But he resisted the idea, because he said he's never seen anything overtly political in anything from either the foundation or the school. He said he also finds it hard to believe because his interest in García Márquez isn't political. "I don't even know his politics," he said. "We never discuss them." But in practically the same breath, he also said: "I'm sure my position is too shallow to know, since I wasn't there long enough, and I was being given the best-foot-forward tour of things. I saw that. When I came back and people said, 'What did you think of Cuba?' I said, 'Well, it's kind of hard to get a total perspective when you're being treated so well.' "

For most of the interview Redford insisted the project couldn't be political because nothing about it appears political. So I explained that if what the defector and others say is true, the school is primarily about propaganda, about helping the country make friends abroad rather than any overt political subterfuge. "Well, I see nothing wrong with artists making friends among themselves," he said ingenuously. "So if that was their aim, I don't see anything wrong with that." But would you make friends or participate in a film school in, say, South Africa, or Chile under Pinochet? "Well, well, I don't know," Redford stammered. "That's not a problem, so I don't have to face it. I'm not aware of this being Cuban. See, that's our problem we've got here." But can you imagine that Castro doesn't control the school when he controls everything else? "I just don't know. I'm not going to comment on Cuban politics because it doesn't interest me, and I think it's dangerous to speculate. I'm interested in Latin American art." In closing, Redford reiterated his faith in Sundance's exchange with the school. "I honestly believe it's a good idea," he said. "And I hope it can work." But he also seemed shaky. "Try to get a response from García Márquez," he encouraged. Then, a few moments later, he sounded nervous. "I hope this is not so," he said. "I just hope it's not so." And García Márquez? I wrote to him and laid out the defector's story. Once again, he declined to respond.

Cinematographer Almendros offered the shrewdest analysis of the project. Almendros, who lived in Cuba from age seventeen (when his family sought refuge in Havana from fascist Spain) to age thirty-one (when he sought refuge again, this time from Castro's regime), pointed out that some very good film schools have been created under dictatorships. He cited the school in Poland, where Roman Polanski studied, and the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Italy, which was founded by Benito Mussolini in the 1930s yet turned out the best anti-fascist filmmakers of the postwar era. "The technical quality of any education isn't political," he said.

The real test for the school, he predicts, will come from foreigners. The government is risking its control by exposing Cubans to non-Communists, who "don't have the same fears as people inside the country." Like other Spanish and Latin American filmmakers opposed to Castro's rule, Almendros thinks that the foundation and the school are basically good ideas. "Although I'm convinced the school is totally Communist, what may come out of it will not necessarily be Communist," he said. "So I would recommend it on selfish grounds. Because I'm sure anyone who goes there, if they stay long enough, they'll be anti-Castro." •