

The sad life and death of a Cuban poet

Before Night Falls, directed by Julian Schnabel, written by Cunningham O'Keefe, Lázaro Gómez Carriles and Julian Schnabel

By David Walsh
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Schnabel's film, in broad, clever, generally superficial strokes, attempts to present a life in poetic terms. We see Arenas as a child in rural Cuba, playing in the mud. There is something elemental in his relationship with the earth, trees, ocean, sex. His initial sympathy with the Cuban revolution of 1959 seems an organic product of his love of nature and freedom. He participates enthusiastically in its early days. He begins to write and receives some recognition.

Then things go bad. In the late 1960s homosexuals, artists, political dissidents face repression. Artists and intellectuals are forced to make humiliating "self-criticisms" before boards of government bureaucrats. The wife of one jumps out a window. Arenas continues to work at his writing, smuggling his novels out of the country for publication. For this crime, he encounters harassment. In 1973, as the result of a provocation on a beach, Arenas is framed up on a charge of sexual molestation and sent to jail. He escapes and tries unsuccessfully to flee Cuba on an inner tube. Eventually he's re-arrested and sent to the notorious El Morro prison, where he serves two years, suffering beatings and abuse, surviving by writing letters for other prisoners.

In 1980 Arenas leaves Cuba in the Mariel Harbor boatlift. Eventually settling in New York, with a companion, he assumes the unhappy condition of a writer in exile. He writes at a furious pace, but contracts AIDS and dies fairly wretchedly.

There are interesting things here, particularly in the first part of the film. Javier Bardem, the Spanish actor who plays Arenas, performs well. In regard to the poet, we think: here is somebody with good intentions and strong feelings; it's a tragedy that he comes up against

repression and suffers. The film, however, never goes deeper than that. For all intents and purposes, it stops there. Nearly everything else is a cliché—"poetic" nature, the free-spirited Bohemians and gays, the brutal officials. We've seen most of this before. *Before Night Falls* goes on for another hour, but it is largely repetitive, even, sadly, self-pitying.

The difficulty lies with Schnabel's conception, or lack of one. But also, to a certain extent, with the figure of Arenas.

He was a talented writer. It's hard to tell in the case of someone who suffered such repression what his writing would have been like under more favorable conditions. A book like *Farewell to the Sea*, for example—one of the five volumes of his fictionalized, hallucinatory autobiography—is difficult to read: 400 pages of outrage and frustration that rarely find coherent expression. Even a sympathetic critic (Jaime Manrique) notes: "Most of his novels, though filled with moments of exceptional brilliance and genius (at his best there's no writer alive who can touch him), are marred by rococo excesses. I find the novels' amorphous, repetitious structures often enervating." With the last comment one has to agree.

Arenas failed to understand the Castro regime. He took it at its word and railed against "Marxism" and "communism" in fairly banal terms. Of course nothing about his poetry or his politics excuses the regime's cruelty. He would have left a more enduring legacy, however, if he had understood what he was up against.

In *Farewell to the Sea*, there are a few passages in which Arenas gives a concrete picture of the life and mentality of the dissident Cuban artist by the late 1960s: "There is so much fear that no one even dares

show it. The worst thing is, he says ... that everything has been so twisted, mixed up, poisoned, polluted, confused that now you can hardly tell where good intentions end and the con job begins.”

This rings true. If Arenas had pursued even *that*, the divergence between the “good intentions” and the “con job,” he might have been obliged to trace out the differing social interests at work and their respective histories and perspectives. He might have come closer, in art, to the truth about the Cuban revolution and the Castro government, not “socialist” or “communist,” but a petty-bourgeois nationalist administration like many others, which had their day in the sun under the peculiar conditions of the Cold War in the 1960s. Castro, pushed into the arms of Soviet Stalinism by US stupidity and intransigence, has merely lasted longer.

As Bill Vann noted in his lecture, “Castroism and the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism” [<http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/castro/index.htm>]: “In reality, Cuba, like so many other oppressed countries in the course of the decades following the Second World War, provided a confirmation of Permanent Revolution, but in the negative. That is, where the working class lacked a revolutionary party, and therefore was incapable of providing leadership to the masses of oppressed, representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois nationalists were able to step in and impose their own solution. Nasser, Nehru, Peron, Ben Bella, Sukharno, the Baathists and, in a later period, the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, were all examples of this process. In virtually all of these cases nationalizations were also carried out.”

Politically, it has been necessary to defend Cuba against American aggression and the semi-fascist émigré community in Miami without ceding an inch to the miserable, anti-democratic Castro regime. (Vann noted: “The Cuban Trotskyists, for example, were ruthlessly repressed, their leaders jailed and their press smashed. The island has long held one of the largest number of political prisoners of any country in the world, not a few of them Castro's former comrades in the July 26 movement.”) In making a film it surely would have been possible to suggest, in whatever manner the artist might have chosen, the significance and contradictions of the Cuban revolution. But that, of course, would require both poetry *and* science (the

science of history).

If Arenas provides hints at least of the possibility of such an approach, Schnabel shows none. He is thoroughly pleased with himself and satisfied with comments such as “The concept of being free in nature and restricted by society is just a fact.... I didn't have any preconceptions about Castro.... I'm not gay. I'm not Cuban. I just tried to tell Reinaldo's story.”

The notion that one can “tell the story” of an individual whose life was inseparably bound up with significant social phenomena—the Cuban revolution, Castroism and anti-Castroism, the role of the US in Latin America and so forth—without making the slightest effort to examine any of the latter, much less draw any conclusions about them, is sheer stupidity. It is the sort of willful ignorance that abounds in “artistic circles” today, particularly in the US, and helps explain the weakness of so much contemporary art.

The result of Schnabel's overwhelming confidence in the power of his own intuition—which has never borne happy fruit in his painting either, incidentally—is a weak and diffuse, rather lazy work. Like *Quills*, it will primarily please those who at this moment, unfortunately, still mistake chatter about art and freedom with their serious defense.

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