

PORTFOLIO

# 'Azucar' more tasteless than bitter

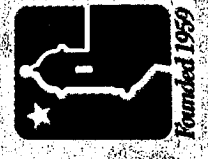
BY FRANCISCO GONZALEZ  
STAR Film Critic

An ostensibly provocative denunciation of the Castro regime in Cuba, "Azúcar amarga" ends up a tawdry melodramatic tract, barely held together by Leon Ichaso's craftsmanship. Young idealist Gustavo (René Lavan) feels on top of the world. An honor student at the Lenin School, he is awarded a scholarship to study Aeronautical Engineering at the University of Prague. At a clandestine rock concert organized by his rebellious brother Bobby (Larry Villanueva), Gustavo meets Yolanda (Mayté Vilán), a lovely teen-ager who captivates him with her beauty. The youngsters fall in love, consummating their feelings when Yolanda offers herself as Gustavo's "graduation gift."

## Movie Review

Despite Yolanda's protests of the lack of freedom in the country and Bobby's constant "troublemaking" as his underground concerts and street protests are repressed by the police, Gustavo refuses to see any malice in the government. After all, his father Tomás (Miguel Gutiérrez) has supported his family as a psychiatrist, a professional career made possible by the revolution. But things change suddenly and devastatingly. Gustavo and Yolanda are kicked out of a tourist beach canteen, an area off-limits to Cubans. Despondent by his meager salary, Tomás quits his psychiatric practice and winds up as a night club pianist, making more from tips than from his profession. In a fit of frustration, Bobby injects AIDS-tainted blood into his veins, choosing death instead of socialism. Much to Gustavo's increasing concern, the promised trip to Prague is indefinitely postponed. To top things off, he finds Yolanda avoiding him, making vague excuses for her behavior. Needless to say, the story winds up tragically.

In the politically charged Latin American cinema, the Cuban question has been peculiarly one-sided. Whereas film celebrations of post-revolutionary Cuba are numerous, movies denouncing the revolution as a sham or relating the exile's point of view are fewer, with more



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## READERS' VIEWPOINTS

### Cuban horrors are deftly shown in 'Azucar Amarga'

In the review by Star Film Critic Francisco González of "Azúcar Amarga," it is sad to note that González, wittingly or not, shows his true colors when he sums up this film as "cheap propaganda."

It is not easy for us, who live amid the splendor of Puerto Rico, to fully grasp the horror of daily existence in Cuba.

"Azúcar Amarga," shows us but a small part of this horror.

The great portion of the Cuban populace exist, every minute of every day, under conditions considerably worse than depicted in this film. Thousands of Cubans have willingly exchanged the risk of death at sea for freedom.

With entry denied to all tourist resorts, the Cuban people are truly second-class citizens within their own country.

These are realities, not "cheap propaganda."

Cubans exist with a total lack of every basic freedom we take for granted:

- Freedom of speech.
- Freedom of assembly.
- Freedom to search gainful employment.
- Freedom to learn.

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- Freedom to travel.
- Freedom to choose where to live.
- Due process of the law.

They live with hunger, persecution, hopelessness, oppression and total resignation, for they well know that their future holds only more of the same.

Beyond these major issues, loss in no running water and daily lengthy power outages, and the cocktail is complete.

All of this is as it is, not "cheap propaganda."

"Azúcar Amarga," is a "horror movie" with a plot entirely too true. The beleaguered people of Cuba need our understanding, our support, and our drive to help steer Washington D.C. away from a policy that has provided no positive results in the more than 30 years it has been in force and toward a program that will help provide all Cubans with a future for which to live.

With "Azúcar Amarga," Castro's well-worn call of *Patría o Muerte* takes on a meaning which bores deep into the hearts of many, many Cubans — prisoners within their homeland.

The León Ichaso-Oriando Jiménez Leal feature "El super" and the Néstor Almendros-Jorge Ulla documentary "Nadie escuchó" are among the few effective films on the other side of the revolution. More typical in their overt doctrinaire approach and mediocre filmmaking are the Almendros-Jiménez Leal production "Conducta impropia" and the sloppily incoherent "Guaguasf" and "Amigos."

Contrary to its predecessors, "Azúcar amarga" has some points in its favor. The black-and-white photography gives the film a raw, gritty look reminiscent of the ideal "imperfect cinema" heralded by the firebrand cinema from our continent. Several moments have their impact, like Bobby's harrowing interrogation, in which the police shave his head. Situations like the favoritism given to tourists at the expense of Cubans are covered with a minimum of credibility.

The film's major problem is the minimum depth it gives to the situation it seeks to expose. Instead of a road to the Cuban crisis at large, the story (co-scripted by Ichaso and "Guaguasf's" Orestes Matacena) is drawn in broad strokes. The country's problems are painted as recurrent, a permanent fixture of the Castro government, with no positive traits whatsoever.

In a country where its dwellers have honed their resourcefulness to cope with dire straits, Gustavo, Tomás and Bobby spend their time whining and crying, overcome by their plight rather than adapting themselves as regular Cubans do. The prostitution situation is portrayed in a grossly stereotyped manner totally unlike the unique *jineteras* situation.

The acting is, to put it nicely, uneven. As the doomed lovers, René Lavan and Mayté Vilán are too attractively photographed and attired to be credible as strained Cuban teen-agers. It doesn't help that they are shallow performers. Only Miguel Gutiérrez emerges unscathed as the frustrated Tomás. The big loser in this fiasco is Ichaso, a talented filmmaker who had risen from the independent "El super" and "Crossover Dreams."

Were it devoid of virtues, "Azúcar amarga" would be easily dismissed as shallow rubbish. Instead, we witness a waste of talent and experience the disappointment of potential worth thrown away for the sake of cheap propaganda.