

PUBLIC LIVES

Cuba on His Mind: The Dual Life of an Artist-Exile

By LYNDA RICHARDSON

CUBA is everywhere in Ivan Acosta's apartment on West 43rd Street. It's in the brightly colored paintings on the lemon mustard walls, the romantic rhythms on the stereo, the stories playing around in his head.

His country of origin has been a state of mind for 40 years, since his family fled the island after Fidel Castro came to power. As a filmmaker and playwright, Mr. Acosta, 47, has made a life of telling Cuban stories.

His big moment of fame was in 1979 with "El Super," his well-received film about the longings and frustrations of a building superintendent in New York. It stands as a quintessential movie about the Cuban exile experience, and became a hit, not just with exiles.

Where has Mr. Acosta been all these years? Glad you asked. (So is he.) He is stepping out tonight to the Latin Beat 2001 film festival at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater. His documentary "Como se Forma una Rumba" ("How to Create a Rumba") is having its premiere. Mr. Acosta says he'll wear a favorite beige guayabera.

"The premiere is like winning an award," says Mr. Acosta, a smile broadening his steel-gray mustache on a recent morning. He's an unpretentious guy dressed in jeans, a gray T-shirt and shiny brown loafers. He eagerly sits down to talk in his home in the towering Manhattan Plaza apartments. So what's happened in the 20 years since "El Super?"

"Now I know more. That's the only thing that's changed."

Most of Mr. Acosta's plays and films have revolved around Cuban politics. Still, it should be no surprise that his latest work is about music. He has produced major Latin jazz concerts at Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall and Town Hall, where in November he will oversee a big-band show about 50 years of mambo. He owns nearly 4,000 records, mostly Afro-Cuban. His compact disc collection nearly scrapes the ceiling.

He says his film was not influenced by the success of that other documentary, "The Buena Vista Social Club." He was editing his film in 1999 when it came out. He saw the movie, crumpling with relief that it was not about the same thing.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

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IVAN ACOSTA

"A lot of the films about Cuban music, including "The Buena Vista Social Club," are about the musicians themselves and don't talk about the roots and the origins of Cuban music," he says. "My documentary tries to clarify where these popular rhythms come from."

Mr. Acosta calls "Como se Forma una Rumba" organic, in the style of *cinéma vérité*. (Others might simply call it low budget.) He made the documentary for \$10,000, asking favors of editors and producers who worked free. It is filmed in Miami, Union City, N.J. and New York.

IN conversations with musicians and videotapes of their performances, he goes deep into rhythms that he was exposed to while growing up in a poor, mostly black neighborhood of Santiago, Cuba. His father worked for the Bacardi Rum Company and his mother was a homemaker.

On this morning, there's a frenetic bustle in Mr. Acosta's two-bedroom apartment, which he shares with his wife, Teresa, and their two children, Yaritza, 17, and Amaury, 14, who is learning to play the drums. Painters are putting a fresh

coat on the walls. His in-laws trickle in and out. On the stereo, there's soft classical music from the Cuban piano player for "I Love Lucy." Mr. Acosta is serene, sitting on a slip-covered couch.

The apartment is Mr. Acosta's base of operation. He holes up in one little corner by a window to write. To earn a living, though, he freelances as an advertising creative director during the day and produces Latin jazz concerts at night.

Since "El Super," he has written six plays. He also made a second feature film, "Amigos," in 1986 about the adventures in assimilation for a Mariel boatlift refugee, but it wasn't widely distributed. He says his own family, which left Cuba in a 92-foot boat with 28 other Cubans, never expected to stay here. But a few months turned into years, then decades.

Walking to the terrace of his 42nd-floor apartment, Mr. Acosta points out the dingy hotel where his family stayed after arriving in New York. He can also see the Hell's Kitchen apartment where they slept on the floor. They later moved to Washington Heights, where he was inspired by the many disgruntled Cuban superintendents to write "El Super."

In his younger days, while studying film at New York University, he advocated the violent overthrow of the Castro government. He has mellowed, now wanting a peaceful transition to democracy, and describes himself as a centrist. He thinks it's important for Cubans in the United States to be seen as diverse in their thinking.

"People have always thought of Cuban exiles as extremist, as rightist," he says. "I'm against dictatorship from the right or the left. I believe the majority of Cuban exiles believe that, but a minority has portrayed an extremist message."

Mr. Acosta hopes to return to Cuba. He wants to see his 14 cousins, the house where he was born, the neighborhood streets. He also wants to shoot a film. But six years ago, when Cuban officials invited him to attend a cultural conference, he said no. As long as the Castro regime stands, he won't go.

"I told them the reason why I left Cuba is still there," he says. "I don't criticize anybody who goes, but that's my feeling. If I have waited so long, I think I can wait a little longer."