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Socialism idealized by film

Cuba, USSR team up

By Fred Poyner
Film Critic

Propaganda films — intentionally created or otherwise — have always been slightly amusing. This Sunday's UPC-sponsored film at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater is "I Am Cuba," a joint Cuba/USSR release dating back to 1964, a la Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

It isn't a simple matter of director Mikhail Kalatozov having been influenced unduly by the Cold War climate. His idealization of a nation struggling in the grip of all manners of Western imperialism is at times provocative.

One such scene, from the first of the story's four parts, contrasts the nightmarish experience of a young Cuban girl in a Havana nightclub with a pseudo-New York socialite's

confrontation with the ghetto. But as a commentary depicting the "rightness" of socialism, revolutionary and capitalist stereotypes are beat to death.

Despite some fantastic black and white photography by cameraman Sergei Urusevsky, the images that bombard the audience for more than two hours have a strained quality.

It is as if Kalatozov feels he has to convince the viewer of something: Revolution is necessary; the West is bad? Who knows.

This film has just recently been shown outside of the Bloc, which would explain some of its overblown tendencies.

Kalatozov collaborated with Cuban Pravda correspondent Yevgeny Yevtushenko in devising a script, in an effort to create a story on par with "Potemkin." Unlike that film, however, "I Am Cuba" falls short of tapping into the power of film as a visionary medium.

The Facts

Film: "I Am Cuba"
Stars: Luz Maia Collazo, Raul Garcia
Director: Mikhail Kalatozov
Rating: NR
Grade: C
Five words: Provocative Cold War propaganda abounds

Two further notes are worth mention. For the Che Guevara fans out there, the final part is devoted to battle images of the Sierra Maestra. (Guevara acted as an unofficial adviser on some of the sets.)

Also, a scene of the drive-in screen of Batista getting firebombed vaguely resembles some of the blaring futurism found in "Panic In the Year Zero," an obscure '60s sci-fi piece.

"I Am Cuba" shows Sunday at the Ross Theater at 1:30, 4, 6:30 and 9 p.m.

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