

Néstor Almendros' Days of Heaven are Finally Here

By Mario E. Beguiristain

En el camarógrafo cubano-español Néstor Almendros se combinan un talento asombroso y una cantidad de paciencia y tenacidad que rendirían honor al legendario Job. Almendros, ganador del Oscar de cinematografía por su película "Days of Heaven", se ha sobrepuesto a una serie de obstáculos que hubieran vencido a alguien menos valiente y menos decidido a practicar su arte. Por ejemplo, ha tenido que exilarse tres veces en su vida. Cuando tenía 15 años, su familia se mudó de España para Cuba, a raíz del establecimiento del franquismo. Luego Almendros se exiló de la Cuba de Batista, a la que regresó, años más tarde, animado por el triunfo de la revolución. Pero el joven pronto se decepcionó del socialismo cubano y terminó yéndose de su país adoptivo nuevamente. Procedió a hacerse de una magnífica reputación como camarógrafo en Europa, al colaborar con genios del cine como François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer y Barbet Schroeder. Su fama europea le ha traído mucho prestigio entre los cineastas norteamericanos, y es ahora, por fin, que comienza su carrera aquí.

When Néstor Almendros picked up his well-deserved Oscar as best cinematographer for *Days of Heaven*, TV audiences all over the world heard him make his acceptance speech in Spanish. "I wanted to salute the 15 million Spanish speaking people in this country," he said, "to share the moment with them and let them know that one hasn't forgotten one's language



Almendros: A sensitive eye for nature. • Creando armonías visuales.

or cultural origins." Those words endeared Almendros to Latinos here, who up until then hardly knew of him.

There is a certain sense of serenity about the tall, dark and trim Almendros that is only broken when he enthusiastically speaks about his passion for films, which has always been the driving force in his life. The road that led him to his Oscar and his position as one of the most sought-after cameramen of the international cinema is marked with the courage and determination of the artist as survivor—a man fighting against all odds to practice his art.

Almendros, born in Barcelona, Spain, 48 years ago, ended up in Cuba at the age of 15 when his Loyalist father fled with his family from Franco's Spain. "We all embraced Cuban citizenship with a lot of enthusiasm and also a certain amount of practicality, since at the time (late Forties) Cuban immigration laws were very strict and it was almost impossible for a foreigner to hold a steady job," says Almendros as he reminisced about days long gone. His parents and a brother are still living in Cuba, and after 18 years of separation he was able to visit them this summer thanks to the relaxed travel restrictions to and from the island.

For a man who has suffered political exile three times in his life, first from Franco's Spain, then from Batista's Cuba and finally from Castro's Cuba, Almendros appears rather unfazed by it all. He has learned to take obstacles in

stride rather than being set back by them. On his way to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to have his name engraved on his Oscar, Almendros drove past a department store in Los Angeles' Miracle Mile district. "I used to work there," he says. "When I had to leave Cuba in 1956 because of Batista, I came here hoping to find some work in the film industry. But I didn't know a soul and it was a truly impenetrable industry at the time. So I became a stockboy in the shoe department at Ohrbach's and lived in a small apartment in the Fairfax area."

He went on to study filmmaking in Italy and later on at New York's City College, where he fondly remembers as his professors Hans Richter and Arthur Knight. While in New York in the Fifties, Almendros fell in with a group of "avant-garde" experimental filmmakers led by Jonas Mekas and Maya Deren, who would later become the founders of the American underground film movement of the Sixties. They made films on a shoestring, and their approach was poetic, lyrical and sensual. All they needed was a camera, film and inspiration to produce some outstanding works which were totally different from anything that was being shown in the commercial cinemas. One can still see the effect of this influence in Almendros today as he

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