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Havana Film Festival New York 2022: A cultural bridge emerging from COVID-19

Michelle Leigh Farrell

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The Havana Film Festival New York (HFFNY) is the city's longest continuously running Latin American/US-Latino festival. In this review I examine the nuances of the festival's 22nd offering from 3-10 November 2022, as well as its unique premise, making it a key space for over two decades of cultural encounter and negotiation. Additionally, I highlight standout works from this year's festival that point to a larger overarching theme in the programming: films documenting community creation despite gripping isolation.

The HFFNY is part of the city's vibrant cinema landscape including Latin American and Caribbean film festivals that reflect the communities that have and continue to shape New York City, including the Dominican Film Festival, the Puerto Rican Heritage Film Festival, the Colombian Film Festival, previous

offerings of the Venezuelan Film Festival, and the recently re-launched New York Latino Film Festival, in addition to the over 40 festivals in the annual cultural calendar. While the above festivals are not A-list events with large production prizes or distribution contracts like Berlin, Venice, Toronto, or Cannes, small festivals such as the HFFNY play key roles to ‘create and sustain communities around films’.[1] The local significance of smaller festivals and a closer analysis of them is, according to film specialists Dovey and Sendra, in part the responsibility of academics to consider small festivals as a way ‘to usher in decolonized film festival worlds’.[2] In this way, festivals such as HFFNY need a closer look as they can reflect established communities (national, ethnic), while also shaping new communities beyond the days of the festival in a multitude of ways.

At a closer look, despite its namesake, HFFNY does not only showcase Cuban films in competition. Instead, HFFNY offers Latin American and US-Latino films. Thus, it echoes the focus of the on-island festival with which it shares its name: *el Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de La Habana*, or known for short as ‘Havana Film Festival’. Founded in 1979 by the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC), the on-island festival was established to promote and exhibit Latin American

films from across the region to ‘recognize and spread the film works that contribute, through their artistic value, to the enrichment and reaffirmation of the Latin American and Caribbean cultural identity’.[3] While HFFNY was born out of a meeting in Havana during *el festival*, it is not a copy of the on-island event. To share more about the relationship with the on-island festival, the HFFNY artistic director, Diana Vargas, explains:[4]

in many ways the on-island festival has always been our big brother. We came into being in a meeting in December in 1999 and we have the director of the festival as one of our advisers. Also, each December, I would travel to Havana to watch films and choose which to program for our Spring festival.[5]

As such the HFFNY artistic director chose a selection from the on-island festival along with additional films not shown on the island including independent, Latin American, and US-Latino films.

Vargas explains that another difference in the two festivals is that the New York-based festival is not funded by the ICAIC. Instead, it is the American Friends of the Ludwig Foundation (AFLFC), a US-based NGO and branch of the Havana-based German NGO, that created and financially supports the annual HFFNY. She

further adds that the focus of the festival is unique as well, sharing that ‘the mission of the AFLFC is to create cultural bridges between Cuba and the United States’.[6] Serving as a space for conversation between two countries with over six decades of an antagonistic political landscape means that this small festival’s task is gigantic.

Given the festival’s colossal premise, which I will discuss further, and the on-going strained diplomatic relationships between the two countries, to put it mildly, I inquire about how the festival wades through these waters. In particular, I am compelled to inquire about the HFFNY 2017 incident with the film *Santa y Andrés* (Lechuga, 2016), a controversial moment lingering in festival history, and how the New York festival negotiates with Cuba’s film institute to program films censored on the island. Vargas explains,

We only had one incident with a film that had been censored in Cuba, *Santa y Andrés*. We programmed the film in New York, and the situation was already tense. We decided to place the film outside of the competition, and the film’s producers decided to remove it from the festival.

With the decision to move the film from the festival’s competition, audiences and filmmakers questioned the

reach of the ICAIC on cinema happenings beyond the island.[7]

The removal of the on-island censored film was traumatic for filmmakers, Cuban independent cinema, audiences, and the New York festival itself. Despite the trauma, or possibly because of it, the HFFNY history with *Santa y Andrés* does not need to be buried out of shame in this festival review. Instead, it is an inflection point highlighting the gargantuan on-going, slow, significant, and at times truly painful work of this particular festival providing a space for artistic exchange through cinema between two countries with failed political diplomacy. As such, the *Santa y Andrés* case points to the crucial roles film festivals, particularly small ones, can play as cultural brokers within local communities and across borders, and as such they encounter agonising decisions along the way.

While HFFNY is unique in its offering, oftentimes small niche festivals fulfill special needs alongside film exhibition. In their *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After*, festival specialists De Valck and Damiens share that ‘beyond such economic and curatorial values, film festivals service a variety of stakeholder interests, ranging from tourism, regional

development, and city marketing to policy goals, political ideals, and soft power.’[8] With 60 years of failed diplomacy, this festival reflects on while also building a needed space for dialogue. In practice, the festival brings Cuban filmmakers, intellectuals, and programmers, along with artists from around Latin America, to participate in roundtables, free community events, and film talkback sessions with New York audiences. Given this dedication to in-person exchange, this small festival also negotiates an exceptional level of logistics between US and Cuba, ensuring extremely difficult visa processes, arranging a broad array of beyond-the-festival events at museums and institutions across the city, as well as providing consecutive interpreting during all film sessions and events to ensure dialogue. Additionally, beyond the days of the festival, the AFLFC hosts artistic exchanges and people-to-people tours for US travelers to the island, to visit art galleries, cinema workshops, music practices, and to learn about Cuba.

The 2020-2021 HFFNY close up

Facing the first wave of COVID, the April 2020 festival was cancelled. Instead of rescheduling the festival, HFFNY offered free virtual screenings of Cuban classics and current works throughout 2020 to accompany their

isolated communities. To ensure audience access, the festival employees subtitled many of the works themselves. They also offered streaming homages to artists that had passed during COVID. The HFFNY artistic director and contributors' commitment to accompanying audiences echoes what Dramani-Issifou refers to as 'the care' that is offered in festivals and curating, not only for filmmakers but also for audiences.[9] Personal relationships and community are central to this niche festival – organising volunteers, while attracting returning audiences to discuss films (and much more) together.

While care of audiences was central to the HFFNY approach for festivals across the globe, the online models and streaming content of 2020 lacked the community-based piece. As Wolf writes, reflecting on the pandemic switch to festivals, 'personal encounters, the experience of hospitality and conviviality, cannot be replaced by telecommunications and must therefore have a place in the true sense of the word'.[10] Similar to Wolf's perspective, HFFNY was determined to hold in-person offerings, re-scheduling the 2021 festival twice, facing surges and closed borders. Finally, HFFNY was presented in November 2021, in-person and masked, amidst the city's Delta variant surge and

requiring double dose vaccine proof to attend. I attended this festival for ten years and did not attend the 2021 edition out of fear of COVID. I not only missed the films, but also the multigenerational conversations in the question-and-answer sessions in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, the between-times, and the encouraging collective energy to stay for a third film showing.

A close look at HFFNY 2022

The 2022 festival meant smaller audiences, and finally a safer return to the experience of communal film viewing and discussions. In its 22nd year the festival awarded five Havana Star Prizes in the categories of Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor/Actress, and Best Documentary with 23 films in competition (14 fiction and 9 documentaries). Each of the awarded filmmakers and their works explicitly drew attention to cinema's ability to alleviate deep levels of human isolation. The competing films originated from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the United States. Combining world premieres such as the closing night documentary *La Habana de Fito / Fito's Havana* (2022),

the festival also included continental premieres such as *Yo nena, yo princesa* (2021) and New York premieres such as *Okupas / Squatters* (2021) and the joyous film *Una película de parejas / A Film about Couples* (2021).

Of exceptional note was the winner of the Best Documentary Star Prize, the personal film *Alis* directed by Clare Weiskoph and Nicolás Van Hemelryck (2022). This documentary takes place in a Colombian orphanage for young adolescent women, sharing their stories as they participate in a filmmaking workshop to learn about character construction. The directors ask the young women to create an imaginary character ‘Alis’ to live in the orphanage with them. Behind their imaginations Alis becomes a vehicle to share their own stories of abuse and abandonment, while also celebrating their community, friendship, and dreams. It is both a fiction and meta-documentary about the immense power of filmmaking.

The Special Mention prize for Best Documentary went to *Okupas / Squatters* by Colombian/US director Catalina Santamaría. Based in the Lower East Side, just blocks from the festival’s Village East Cinema, the film centers on the Umbrella House as a living

breathing space for resistance, organisation, and community. Slowly taking over the abandoned building and repairing the off-the-grid structure, audiences see how individuals organised making the Umbrella House a refuge for those who had faced cruel realities of the New York City housing crisis, eviction, abuse, racism, and multiple levels of phobias. Speaking directly to the camera, one contributor explains, ‘New York City for me is this building ... without this building I wouldn’t be here but I also wouldn’t have had as rich a life as I had in New York City.’ It was a mutual rescue effort, as many of those interviewed credit the home itself for saving them and offering community in times of stark loneliness.

While revealing the hidden histories of the dynamic and diverse peoples of the Lower East Side, what is unexpected is that the squatters legalised the off-the-grid building despite run-ins with then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Using the very system that had previously excluded them from housing, the residents incorporated the building in 2010. The film concludes with connecting the neighborhood’s current struggle to protect the abandoned lots converted into urban gardens. The hyper-local

timeliness of the story was palpable, as the film's New York premiere sold out – rare in the documentary category of this small festival.

Adding to the theme of building community despite isolation is the Star Prize winner for Best Fictional Film: the 2021 Cuban film *Cuentos de un día más / Tales of Another Day* (Fernando Pérez, Rosa María Rodríguez, Alán Gonzalez, Carolina Fernandez Vega-Charadán, Yoel Infante, Katherine T. Gavilán, Sheyla Pool, Eduardo Emil). *Cuentos* is the first Cuban film collaboration to combine ICAIC official support with Cuban independent production to create an anthology film project. A committed supporter of young and emerging Cuban filmmakers, Pérez spearheaded the collaborative project during the pandemic isolation, launching an open call for fiction shorts that were less than fifteen minutes in length. The chosen six young directors and their separate independent Cuban production companies offer strikingly different insights into the ways Cubans experienced the pandemic. Beyond Cuba's official COVID statistics, these are nuanced explorations of life during the pandemic that balance the quirky with the bleak, along with romance and pain. What is exceptional is the way the distinct individual short

films braid together, creating an impactful audience experience of Cuban daily life during the pandemic.

In addition to films in competition, the festival continued its on-going practice of offering Latin American retrospectives, re-releasing the Cuban film *Retratos de Teresa / Portraits of Teresa* (Paz Vega, 1979). The re-release included the first-ever English-subtitled version of the groundbreaking Cuban film on gendered roles and invisible labor. The annual retrospectives help to educate audiences, making visible the region's longstanding cinema traditions. In this way, the American Friends of the Ludwig Foundation and the festival participate in film restoration projects such as this one, subtitling classic Latin American films, contributing funds for film restoration, and connecting film projects with archival institutions during the year beyond the days of the festival.

Additionally, the annual programming includes roundtable discussions on cinema and filmmaking. The 2022 festival included the launch of Cuban film specialist Ivan Giroud's film history book *La historia del sobre amarillo: el Cine en Cuba (1948-1964) / The History of the Yellow Envelope: Film in Cuba (1948-1964)*.

The book, among other contributions, reveals newly-found archival research including the 1960s Cuban intellectual debates among leading artists and the State on the role cinema would occupy in the Cuban Revolution. Guiding the discussion, film Professor Jerry Carlson (City University of New York) interviewed Giroud to reflect on how he created the volume and dealt with the main areas of research in the book.

From world premieres to local New York showings, to retrospectives and book launches, this unique festival fulfills many roles, gathering cinemas from Latin American and US-Latino filmmakers, while also serving as a complex space for cross-cultural dialogue across languages. As New York City slowly crawls out of the pandemic, it is my hope that audiences continue to return to impactful festivals such as this one. While small in size and premieres compared to the famous global festivals, this festival opens a needed space for audiences to participate in the ongoing work of community-based festivals: dialogue, reflections, joy, and cultural growth.

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Notes

- [1] Damiens & De Valck 2023, p. 3.
- [2] Dovey & Sendra 2023, p. 278.
- [3] Havana Film Festival Webb 2023.
- [4] Vargas, personal communication with the author, January 2023.
- [5] Interview conducted in Spanish. All translations completed by the author.
- [6] Vargas 2023.
- [7] Pentón 2022, p. 115.
- [8] Damiens & De Valck 2023, p. 2.
- [9] Dramani-Issifou 2023, p. 264.
- [10] Wolf 2021.