

legislation that would help his constituents, or the New Dealers gloating over the defeat of an independent-minded Democrat. (One of them even pulled out a banjo and lead the group in singing, "Old George Huddleston ain't what he uster be, ain't what he uster be.") *Blood of the Liberals* describes dozens of such conflicts, where two

opposing positions might reasonably lay claim to the true liberal principle. If Packer's broad view of liberalism prevents him from choosing among them, it does make him an engaging and personal chronicler of the dilemmas. ■

Jefferson Decker is managing editor of Boston Review.

on the artist's work in a new form, only to find a highly watchable film on the Brooklyn street kid who capped a meteoric career in the art world with his death from a heroin overdose at 27.

In *Before Night Falls*, technically a far more ambitious project than *Basquiat*, Schnabel showcases for broader audiences his uncanny combination of charm, corn, exuberance and sentiment. The movie works terrifically. It features a central performance by Spanish superstar Javier Bardem who fully deserves his multiple awards (notably at the Venice Film Festival). It tells a compelling, tightly paced tale. It's full of small visual wonders and laced with delicious celebrity cameos (Johnny Depp both as a transvestite prisoner and as the prison guard; Sean Penn as a cranky peasant), as well as a nice turn for the director's liquidly handsome young son as the youthful Arenas.

The film stays on the safe side of every political controversy. To Cuban-Americans mobilized to pounce on the film for being soft on dictatorship, Schnabel has simply put Castro on screen, in documentary footage that indicts him out of his own mouth. For gays and lesbians, this is a richly drawn portrait of someone whose sexuality was an essential aspect of his public art and the passion for freedom that infused every part of his art. And Schnabel has not slighted Arenas' criticism of his refuge in exile. He features a quip Arenas developed in his first encounters with the U.S. press: "The difference between the communist and capitalist systems is that, although both give you a kick in the ass, in the communist system you have to applaud, while in the capitalist system you can scream."

The story closely follows Arenas' memoir. Reinaldo the little boy ecstatically experiences the wonder of the natural world, including the steamy human beings who surround him. Blue filters that enhance the green quality of the countryside and tinkering with color contrast give this opening segment a peculiarly engaging look, part documentary and part portrait. This approach to representing visual memory

# Freedom To Scream

By Pat Aufderheide

The gay Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas was a kind of open wound of left politics in the '80s. As a

**Before Night Falls**  
Directed by Julian Schnabel

censored author in a communist dictatorship, he was walking proof of a God that failed, though the anti-communists, neocons and anti-Castro Cubans who heralded his cause also often found his sexually charged art somewhat alarming. As a victim of anti-homosexual persecution in a puritanical regime, Arenas was an icon for the rising movement of gay and lesbian identity politics, as much for his performance of his sexuality as for his art. When it became evident he was dying of AIDS, he also became a symbol of gay demands for more social resources directed to the disease. As an outspoken organizer of anti-Castro activities, he won the scorn of New Leftists who believed that the post-Mariel Cuban government had learned a lesson from its ugly history and that gay activists like Arenas were being exploited by right-wingers.

Various hailed and denounced for reasons that intersected with but did not capture his passions, Arenas continued furiously to compose poetry and novels. In an expiring act of vitality, he completed his memoirs—and then, in impoverished exile in New York, took his own life at the age of 37 in 1990. Now another high-profile artist has told Arenas' life story, in *Before Night Falls*, a film which borrows its title from the author's memoir.

Director Julian Schnabel is a celebrity artist, an artist of celebrity even. He launched his career in the plastic arts within the aura of Andy Warhol, succeeding in making the pop artist downright peevish with jealousy. No amount of critical contempt for the crude simplicity



of his broken-plate sculpture-paintings stopped him from becoming a gallery and society darling. When his first film, *Basquiat*, came out in 1996, critics lined up to pour scorn

serves the film well when the teen-ager runs away to join the rebels, who are already driving trucks and tanks toward the capital in victory in 1958.

Arenas' negotiation of a riotous sexual revolution on the beaches and his burgeoning literary career are counterpointed with the growing problems of basic provisioning (a typewriter, a bottle of wine, a place to sleep) and the first signs of repression. Savagely funny anecdotes, edited with joke-like punch and shot in locations and with filters that emphasize summer sunlight, tell this part of the story. Rich information about the look and feel of Havana at the time are packed into scenes of reminiscence, in which period music floods a street or cabaret. (As always, however, Schnabel chooses effective over authentic; in one nightclub sequence, careful listeners will hear Lou Reed on the soundtrack, inserted because Schnabel believed it better evoked Arenas' state of feeling than period Cuban music.)

The encroaching repression is told in sequences that condense history. In a scene that deftly reveals the political function of the writers' union, the legendary Cuban author José Lezama Lima confidentially shares with Arenas his understanding that artists are the enemy of the regime by definition. The real-life show trials of writer Heberto Padilla and military leader Arnaldo Ochoa are merged. Darkness descends as Arenas is captured and plunged into the flickering hell of El Morro (filmed in deep reds and brown in a similar Spanish colonial castle-prison in Mexico), where he becomes the star of the prison because of his ability to write.

Schnabel powerfully and flashily recreates images from Arenas' poetry to make synaptic statements about Arenas' emotions. Within the prison, for instance, the sight of a dark grated prison wall, animated by the many swinging items that prisoners use to communicate with their resident author, is a visual poem drawn from the Arenas' own description. After his release from prison, Arenas finds a hotel room that happens to adjoin an abandoned nunnery, which he and his raffish friends soon invade, just as they did in real life.

Then, in an episode that draws not on Arenas' life but on his prose poetry, the

friends try to escape in a gas balloon. A turncoat among them attempts to flee without them; the attempt fails miserably with a crash on the Malecón, the Havana seawall (preternaturally and accurately reconstructed for the film in Vera Cruz, Mexico). It is one of those boldly larger-than-life gestures that dot the film and that remind one of the way in which a large screen can make over-the-top excess just enough. Arenas' delight at the feel of snow on his face when he arrives in New York—a thrill that also signifies freedom—also becomes an in-your-face visual thrill.

Schnabel told *In These Times*, with the kind of wry self-delight for which he is known, that famed Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante told him *Before Night Falls* was "the greatest Cuban film, and it was made by a Jew in Mexico." He also carefully notes the participation of Arenas' longtime friend Lázaro Gomez Carriles in the writing of the script. "Lázaro calls me Reinaldo sometimes," he says. "It's like Reinaldo kind of wrote me into the script." While he acknowledges his great debt to Arenas' writing, in the end, Schnabel says, "This is a movie, whether the guy was a great or a terrible writer. It has to succeed on its own merits."

Schnabel's goal is to entertain, so it's not surprising what is omitted. The movie never engages one of the most sharply drawn parts of the memoir, where Arenas with a cruel but fair wit ridicules what he calls a "festive and fascist left" that internationally supported Castro. It skips delicately past Arenas' Miami experience, which avoids having to deal with his denunciation of a gossip-filled "plastic world" where physical and moral swamps coincided. It leaves on the page some of his more bitter comments about women. Arenas' suicide letter, in which he holds Fidel Castro accountable for his death, is excluded.

*Before Night Falls* tells a story with universal themes, of a search for freedom that transcends political limits. It does not examine the history of a political era, and so it does not and cannot explore why Arenas' life became the crossroads of so many political passions. But the story it does tell, it tells with flourish and with heart. ■

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*the terribly lonely Detective has a visit from a friend...*

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12-26

Continued from page 38

Durito has come to say good-bye to Mexico City and has decided to give a gift to this city, about which everyone complains and no one abandons. A gift. This is Durito, a beetle of the Lacandon Jungle in the center of Mexico City.

Durito says good-bye with a gift.

He makes an elegant magician's gesture. Everything stops. The lights go out like a candle extinguished by a gentle lick of wind on its face. Another gesture and a reflecting light illuminates a music box in the display window. A ballerina in a fine lilac costume holds an endless stillness, hands crossed overhead, legs held together, balanced on tiptoes. Durito tries to imitate the position, but promptly gets his many arms entangled. Another magic gesture, and a piano, the size of a cigarette box, appears. Durito sits in front of the piano and puts a jug of beer on top—who knows where he got it from, but it's already half empty. He cracks and flexes his fingers, doing digital gymnastics just like the pianists in the movies. Then he turns toward the ballerina and nods his head. The ballerina begins to stir and makes a bow. Durito hums an unknown tune, beats a rhythm with his little legs, closes his eyes.

The first notes begin. Durito plays the piano with four hands. On the other side of the glass pane, the ballerina begins to twirl and gently lifts her right thigh. Durito leans on the keyboard and plays furiously. The ballerina performs her best steps within the prison of the little music box. The city disappears. There is nothing but Durito at his piano and the ballerina in her music box. Durito plays, and the ballerina dances. The city is surprised; its cheeks blush as when one receives an unexpected gift, a pleasant surprise, good news. Durito gives his best gift: an unbreakable and eternal mirror, a good-bye that is harmless, that heals, that cleanses. The spectacle lasts only a few instants. The last notes fade as the cities that populate this city take shape again. The ballerina returns to her uncomfortable immobility; Durito turns up the collar of his trench coat and makes a slight bow toward the display window.

"Will you always be behind the glass pane?" Durito asks her, and asks himself. "Will you always be on the other side of my over here, and will I always be on this side of your over there?"

Durito crosses the street, arranges his hat and continues to walk. Before going around the corner, he turns toward the display window: He notices a star-shaped hole in the glass. The alarms are ringing uselessly. Behind the window, the ballerina is no longer in the music box.



"This city is sick," Durito writes to me. "When its illness becomes a crisis, it will be cured. This collective loneliness, multiplied by millions and empowered, will end by finding itself and finding the reason for its powerlessness. Then, and only then, will this city shed its gray dress and adorn itself with brightly colored ribbons, which are so abundant in the provinces.

"This city lives a cruel game of mirrors, but the game of the mirrors is useless and sterile if finding the transparency of glass is not a goal. It is enough to understand this and, as who-knows-who said, struggle and begin to be happy.

"I'm coming back. Prepare the tobacco and the insomnia. I have a lot to tell you, Sancho."

Durito signs off. ■

Adapted from *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, selected writings of *Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos*, recently published by *Seven Stories Press*.

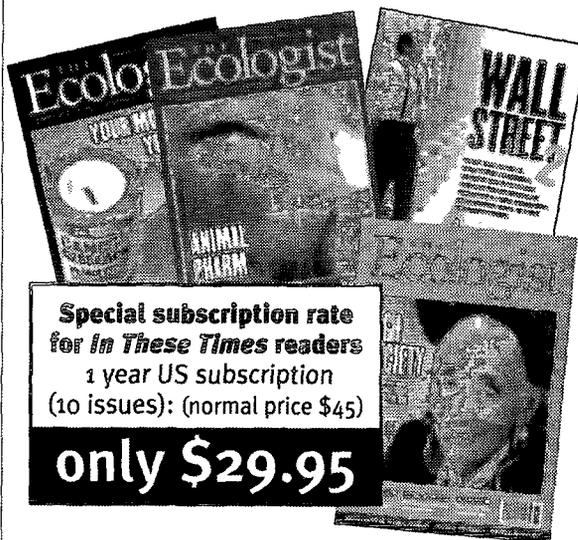
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In the breathless solitude of the first years of the Zapatista uprising, a peculiar fellow appeared at our camp; a little smoking beetle, very well read and an ever better talker, who gave himself the task of giving his company to a soldier, El Sup.

Legally named Nebuchadnezzar, this beetle, traveling incognito, goes under the *nom de guerre* Durito, because of his hard shell. ...

From the mountains of southeast Mexico  
SUBCOMANDANTE INSURGENTE MARCOS

Dawn. Mexico City. Durito wanders through the streets adjoining the Zocalo. Sporting a small trench coat and a hat angled like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, Durito pretends to pass unnoticed. His outfit and slow crawl are unnecessary, as he sticks to the shadows that escape the bright display windows. Shadow of the shadow, silent walk, angled hat, a dragging trench coat, Durito walks at dawn through Mexico City. No one notices him. They do not see him, not because he is well disguised or because of that tiny, quixotic detective outfit from the '50s, or because he is barely distinguishable from the mounds of garbage. Durito walks amid papers being dragged here and there by a whisk of the unpredictable winds that populate the dawns of Mexico City. No one sees Durito, for the simple reason that in this city no one sees anyone.

"This city is sick," Durito writes to me. "It is sick from loneliness and fear. It is a great collective of solitudes. It is a collection of cities, one for each resident. It's not about sums of anguish (do you know of a loneliness without anguish?), but about a potency; each loneliness is multiplied by the number of lonely people that surround it. It is as though each person's

solitude entered a House of Mirrors, like those you see in the country fairs. Each solitude is a mirror that reflects another solitude; and like a mirror, bounces off more solitudes."

Durito has begun to discover that he is in foreign territory, that the city is not his place. In his heart and in this dawn, Durito packs his bag. He walks this road as though taking inventory, a last caress, like a lover who knows this is good-bye. At certain moments, the sound of footsteps diminishes and the cry of the sirens, which frightens outsiders, increases. And Durito is one of those outsiders, so he stops on the corner each time the red-and-blue blinking lights crisscross the street. Durito takes advantage of the complicity of a doorway in order to light a pipe guerrilla-style: a tiny spark, a deep breath, and the smoke engulfing his gaze and face. Durito stops. He looks and sees. In front of him, a display window catches his eye. Durito comes near and looks through the great glass pane to what exists beyond it. Mirrors of all shapes and sizes, porcelain and glass figurines, cut crystal, tiny music boxes. "These are no talking boxes," Durito says to himself, without forgetting the long years spent in the jungle of the Mexican Southeast.

*Continued on page 37*