

An overview of the 12th Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London

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The civil liberties organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) held its twelfth annual Film Festival in London recently, screening 22 dramas and documentaries. Several, such as Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls* have been reviewed on the *World Socialist Web Site* previously.

The festival provided the opportunity to see the world premiere of Ken Fero's *Injustice*, documenting the 30-year struggle against deaths in police custody in Britain. It also screened the British premiere of several other films, including Shaya Mercer's *Trade Off*—a depiction of the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in 1999.

In all films—whether they are political or not—one asks certain basic questions: Does the filmmaker approach his or her subject in a fresh, satisfying and thoughtful way? Is the film truthful in its reflection of reality? At a human rights festival screening, with so many openly political films, one is also obliged to ask in addition: What is the filmmaker's political perspective? Do we learn any lessons?

My overall impression at the end of the festival was that many of the films were good technically, and produced by filmmakers who show an obvious sympathy for the oppressed. Important issues are tackled. Emotions are aroused—few could be unmoved by the sight of children scratching a living in the sewers of Romania (*Children Underground*) or the courage of the French Resistance fighters betrayed to the Nazis (*Terrorists in Retirement*). However, there seems to be a universal weakness to these films—the flippant or lazy treatment of their historical and social context. Julian Schnabel, who introduced his own film *Before Night Falls* at the gala night, exemplified this. The film deals with the life of the gay Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas, his persecution by the Cuban regime and eventual death

in poverty in New York. According to Schnabel, “What I liked was Reinaldo's humour. His sense of humour kept him alive and keeps Cubans alive ... and in the US and here I guess.”

Humour is an essential ingredient in many films, but in Schnabel's hand, an opportunity to explore the rich and complex interplay between Arenas's life and Castro's Cuba is sacrificed to a few cheap jokes. Are we any the wiser when all we are really told about the regime is that it is now “Cuba with balls”, i.e., another form of Latin machismo?

To portray humanity's problems creatively is only possible if it is understood that these problems are historically rooted and are the product of class society. To ignore this tends to leave the audience with the conclusion that people are just “naturally” violent, prejudiced or stupid. The problem is presented purely as “men hating women” or “a white state hating black people”. A few courageous individuals may try and fight back, but all that one can do is show some moral outrage and pressure the powers-that-be to do “something”.

What is missing is any conception that the working class and oppressed should be mobilised to advance their own solution to the problems created by capitalism. To see the only viable solution to human rights abuse being the intervention by the “international community”—which usually means the intervention of the major Western powers or the United Nations—as advocated by Human Rights Watch and other liberal critics gathered at the film festival, will most assuredly pave the way for new disasters.



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