

Papa: Hemingway in Cuba—The banalization of the novelist and his art

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Directed by Bob Yari; written by Denne Bart Petitclerc

The screenplay for *Papa: Hemingway in Cuba* was authored by Denne Bart Petitclerc, who died in 2006. Petitclerc, a journalist and screenwriter, befriended American writer Ernest Hemingway in the mid-1950s when he was a reporter at the *Miami Herald* and Hemingway was living in Havana, Cuba.

The film, directed by Bob Yari, follows the relationship that develops after a fictional stand-in for Petitclerc, Ed Myers (Giovanni Ribisi), writes an admiring letter to Hemingway (Adrian Sparks).

As we later learn, Myers-Petitclerc was abandoned by his father at the age of five and given up to an orphanage, along with an older sister, by his overwhelmed mother. Years later, he talked his way into a job as a local sports writer at a northern California newspaper. When his editor discovered that Myers was a poor speller, he was promptly fired. The budding journalist offered to work for free until he could improve his writing. Myers accomplished that by copying out Hemingway's stories and assiduously using them as a model, as he eventually explains to the famed author in person.

That incident is intriguing, and Myers's admiration for Hemingway, whom he comes to look upon as a surrogate father, is understandable, but Petitclerc's script is terribly weak and clichéd and Yari's direction is poor and unconvincing. The large historical issues associated with Hemingway's life and best writing are entirely ignored. *Papa Hemingway in Cuba* reduces everything in an extremely banal manner to the search for a father ("Papa" was the writer's rather distasteful nickname), for affection, or both.

As the film's events unfold, Myers makes regular visits to Havana—where Hemingway lived from 1939 to 1960 and wrote a number of well-known works—and becomes part of the household. Mary Hemingway (Joely Richardson) even comes to rely on Myers to help her deal

with Hemingway's increasingly disordered, volatile mental state, much to the chagrin of Myers's girl-friend, Debbie Hunt (Minka Kelly).

Meanwhile, the armed rebellion led by Fidel Castro and others against the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista is gathering strength. Hemingway and Myers are onlookers during a failed assault on the presidential palace, which results in all the attackers being killed. The writer's circle of friends includes various refugees from Franco's Spain and leftist Cuban opponents of Batista. Myers begins to suspect Hemingway is involved in gun-smuggling for the rebels. In fact, an FBI agent in Miami asks Myers to spy on the Hemingway household, a suggestion the journalist rejects with contempt. The US government continues to hound Hemingway.

(Hemingway, in fact, welcomed the coming to power of Castro and his associates, writing to a friend in 1960, "I believe completely in the historical necessity of the Cuban Revolution.")

Myers witnesses bitter quarrels between Hemingway and his wife. The writer is unable to work, drinks heavily. "I want to die," he announces, and regularly threatens suicide. He shoots himself shortly after leaving Cuba, in July 1961.

The elements of a fascinating work of art are present here, but the various aspects of Hemingway's life and times are treated so carelessly and superficially that the opportunity is largely wasted. In the fashion of so many contemporary films, the writer's difficulties are almost exclusively and stupidly attributed to personal-family issues: the supposedly domineering behavior of his mother, his father's suicide (which, in fact, did not occur until Ernest was almost 30), etc.

For his part, Myers loosens up under the influence of Hemingway's free-spirited household and finds his way, finally, to declaring his true feelings for his girl-friend. Generally speaking, the central characters in *Papa:*

Hemingway in Cuba discover what has been missing in their lives—“love and friendship.” Yes, the film is as intellectually and dramatically poverty-stricken as that.

Yari’s intentions may be quite sincere, but he is clearly over his head with this material. The film’s strongest, most creditable element is its sharp antipathy for the FBI and the US authorities, but even here it stumbles badly, as the fictional Hemingway ascribes his mistreatment solely to the personal vindictiveness of J. Edgar Hoover.

Papa: Hemingway in Cuba is the first Hollywood film to be shot in Cuba since the 1959 revolution. The authorities allowed Yari and crew to film in Hemingway’s old home, Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm), 15 miles east of Havana, which is now a museum. There are numerous stunning shots of Havana and the Cuban shoreline.

Ribisi, as always, gives an intelligent, sensitive performance and contributes whatever substance there is to the film, but the other actors are not to blame either for the soap opera-style dialogue, obvious characterizations, trite situations and contrived histrionics.

Hemingway, at his most eloquent and precise, was one of America’s greatest writers in the 20th century. There are few works of fiction as honest and emotional as the short stories and novels he wrote in the aftermath of World War I, during which he served as an ambulance driver.

As we noted in 2011: “*In Our Time*, Hemingway’s first book of stories, appeared in 1925 and made an immediate impact. It contained stories about northern Michigan as well as vignettes from Europe after the war. It contained very fine work, including, ‘Indian Camp,’ ‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,’ ‘The End of Something,’ ‘The Three-Day Blow’ and ‘Big Two-Hearted River.’ Hemingway’s remarkable expressive power was already evident.”

In the last-mentioned story, the hero, Nick Adams, is recovering from the physical and emotional effects of World War I, during a fishing trip in the northern woods. The war and his wounds are never mentioned. Hemingway considered the bloody conflict the “central fact of our time.” As critic Edmund Wilson noted, “The wholesale shattering of human beings” in which he took part, and the horror, anxiety and fascination the events engendered, never left him. “The boy from the American Middle West,” in Wilson’s phrase, was given a touch of panic that he never lost.

Hemingway, along with many intellectuals of his generation, turned to the left, becoming a fellow traveler

of the Communist Party at various points in his life, although he never dropped his disagreements with what he called the Moscow “yes-men.” In fact, his novel about the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), brought down the wrath of the international Stalinist apparatus on Hemingway’s head. A scurrilous article in the Cuban Communist Party newspaper, *Hoy*, in 1943, for example, argued that the novel was “so miserable, so slanderous, that it met with excellent reception among the Fascists, the Trotskyists,” etc., etc.

By the time of the events in Yari’s film, Hemingway was an unhealthy and deeply unhappy man. He wrote very little of value in the last several decades of his life. And it is absurd to treat his condition, as *Papa* does, as a purely individual, psychological matter. Hemingway himself, quite correctly, pointed out in a 1950 letter, “How we are is how the world has been.”

We wrote in 2011: “The disappointments of the 20th century undoubtedly weighed on him, as they did on every sensitive artist and intellectual. The experience in Spain, the machinations of the Stalinists...were disillusioning. The outcome of the Second World War, the mood of reaction and conformism in the US, the deaths...or betrayals...of many of his contemporaries, all that must have helped to depress Hemingway. There is far less purpose to what he wrote, less important commitment.”

He once asserted, “The hardest thing in the world to do is to write straight, honest prose on human beings.” And in a letter to his father, he wrote, “I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing.”

Unhappily, if the viewer were to base him- or herself on the Hemingway represented in Yari’s *Papa*, crudely diminished to his “he-man” worst and least sympathetic, he or she would likely never open a single volume of Hemingway’s writing. And that would be a shame.



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