

The Miami Herald

Not showing at a theater near you

BY ANA MENENDEZ

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The Miami International Film Festival runs through this weekend, a cinematic bounty featuring 166 films from 54 countries. Not showing: *The Man of Two Havanas*, the story of Max Lesnik as told by his daughter, filmmaker Vivien Lesnik Weisman.

Lesnik is a legendary and complex figure on both sides of the Straits: an early friend and supporter of Fidel's who abandoned the revolution only to lead the anti-embargo, pro-dialogue forces in exile. "Controversial" is too tame a description for the man.

The film is his daughter's attempt not only to tell Lesnik's story, but to understand her place in it. "In setting out to discover what makes her father tick, Lesnik Weisman finds a new depth to her own character," wrote the Los Angeles Times earlier this month.

When it played at the *Tribeca Film Festival* last year, *The Man of Two Havanas* packed the house. *Time Out New York* and the *New York Post* each put the film on their list of must-sees. *The New York Times* movie guide called it a "deeply personal and finely felt documentary."

ON SCREENS ELSEWHERE

Audiences in New York, Tampa and California had a chance to see the film. Not so in Miami. The reason for that, as with most things Cuban here, is part mystery, part history and part screw-up.

"Oh no, there's nothing odd about it," said Patrick de Bokay, who made his debut as festival director this year. He told me he could not remember when he first heard about the film, but it came down to a late submission and a tight program. "If I could show everything, I would do it."

Lesnik Weisman says an aide was supposed to have sent the film last fall. The festival says it didn't receive it. There's no record of it being sent, and Lesnik Weisman admits it might not have gone out.

In January, she sent it again, saying organizers promised slots were still open. Organizers say the festival had closed.

The back and forth is a bit disingenuous all around. If she were committed to showing the film here, Lesnik Weisman might have been more diligent in making sure it got into the right hands. But the festival also dropped the ball. Most programmers don't rely on submissions, anyway, points out Eric Odum, president of the *Gasparilla Film Festival* in Tampa.

"Good programmers go online, they read *Hollywood Reporter*," he said. "I have a hard time believing they didn't know about this film."

'GOOD ENOUGH FOR US'

Odum heard about the film and contacted Lesnik Weisman directly. Last weekend, the film played to full houses of 400 people in Tampa.

It's a shame a bigger effort wasn't made to ensure the film was part of the lineup in Miami.

Many of the reviews around the country have mentioned exile "extremists," a reference to the bombings of Lesnik's offices in the 1970s.

The film, which I saw Tuesday, is overtly political. There is much in it -- including a sympathetic, though subtle, treatment of the revolution -- to make conservatives see red. But I doubt it would have invited trouble. Welcoming the film would have been a way to show that the city has changed since the scary days Weisman Lesnik recalls from her childhood.

But art must be about more than polemics. *The Man of Two Havanas* is, at heart, the poignant story of a girl and her father and the many ways Cuba defined and defied those bonds.

It is, in other words, the quintessential story of Miami. And for that alone, it deserves to play here.