

By Albor Ruiz

'2 Havanas' captures Cuban's plight

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When Vivien Lesnick Weisman, director of the fascinating documentary "The Man of Two Havanas," was a little girl, she did not have many friends. She was nice enough, mind you, but in Miami, where she grew up, parents thought it too risky for their children to play with her.

And after watching her film - as much a portrait of the political struggles of her father as a love letter to him - you understand why. The film was shown at the Tribeca Film Festival two weeks ago.

The director's father, Max Lesnick, is a fiery journalist and political activist who grew up in Havana and fought alongside Fidel Castro - his college friend - against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship.

The Cuban revolution came into power in 1959, but in the '60s, Lesnick became disillusioned and fled Cuba for Miami with his wife and two daughters.

"I didn't agree with the close relation with the USSR," he said.

Engaging and quick-witted, Lesnick is the director of Radio Miami, a popular if controversial talk show. He has spent much of his life swimming against the current - and has paid dearly for such independence.

The film tells the story of Lesnick's struggle in Miami against the U.S. embargo, his reencounter with his homeland after years of absence, and the renewal of his friendship with Castro.

Never a favorite of ultraright Cuban-Americans in South Florida, they let him - and his family - know in no uncertain ways.

"Bombs, death threats and drive-by shootings were a daily occurrence in our [Little Havana] home," his daughter remembers.

For almost 20 years, the outspoken Max published a magazine, *Réplica*, in Miami. His offices were bombed 11 times by hard-liners who tried to silence him.

"What most Americans don't know is that terrorism in America did not begin on Sept. 11," said Lesnick Weisman. "In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a reign of terror in Miami. There were as many as seven bombings in one day, and hundreds per year."

If "The Man of Two Havanas" had only told Max Lesnick's story, it would have already been a powerful film. But it does more: The film lets the viewer almost trace the sometimes anguished inner workings of the director in her quest to understand her father, his struggle and Cuba, the country where she was born and that, as a child, she thought she didn't care much about.

"My documentary, 'The Man of Two Havanas,' is my attempt to understand why my dad always put Cuba and his public life above his family. Well, namely me," Lesnick Weisman has said. "It is also about his friendship with Castro, his subsequent breakup and reunion."

In the 2-1/2 years she spent making the documentary, Lesnick Weisman grew closer to her father and, at last, came to comprehend his passion for Cuba.

In a particularly lucid moment, Max Lesnick says in "The Man of Two Havanas," "Miami is like a hell where everything is inverted, murder is characterized as heroic, acts of terrorism as acts of heroism."

He had in mind Luis Posada Carriles, the international terrorist responsible for masterminding the bombing of a Cuban passenger jet that killed 73 people, among many other crimes. On Thursday, a Texas federal judge dropped all charges against him.

After an elated Posada Carriles announced he would go back to live in Miami, Lesnick's words sound even more lucid. Sadly, they also leave no doubt about how deep the divide is between the two Havanas, despite the brave efforts of people like Max Lesnick.