

## Drawn in by Fidel Castro's revolution

Seeking to understand her dad led filmmaker Vivien Lesnik Weisman to learn about herself as well. 'The Man of Two of Two Havanas' is the result.  
By Agustin Gurza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Javier Galeano / Associated Press

FATHER-DAUGHTER: Max Lesnik is the subject of Vivien Lesnik Weisman's "The Man of Two Havanas."

Vivien Lesnik Weisman counted herself among that rare breed -- a Cuban American not interested in politics -- when she started to make a documentary about her father, a quixotic revolutionary-in-exile. In the opening of her new movie, "The Man of Two Havanas," the fledgling filmmaker minces no words about Max Lesnik's comrades, including Fidel Castro, and the lost causes he has championed under both communism and capitalism.

"They stole my father's attention and they wasted his life, and I hated them for it," says Lesnik Weisman, 47, in her slightly quirky but moving portrait. "I've spent my whole life watching him lose, and I just didn't get it."

By the end, she does understand. In setting out to discover what makes her father tick, Lesnik Weisman finds a new depth to her own character. She sheds her adolescent self-centeredness to embrace his social vision and shakes off her apathy to wholeheartedly assume her Cuban identity. The focus on the father-daughter relationship provides a fascinating frame to look at the much-studied Cuban revolution with a fresh eye, even as it seems on the threshold of change.

The film, which has won awards and ovations at film festivals from Tribeca to Havana (and which screens this month in San Diego), traces the vertiginous zigzag of Lesnik's life, from Castro comrade-in-arms to persecuted dissenter to controversial exile and finally reconciled defender of the revolution. Lesnik, now 77, is still playing to both sides of the Florida Straits. He returned this

week from Cuba, where he witnessed the changing of the guard as an ailing Castro handed the country's political reins to younger brother Raul.

I spoke with him by phone from Miami following his daily radio show, "Radio Miami." His voice still has that explosive cadence and commanding intensity that often characterizes Cuban political discourse. The one time his tone softened was when he spoke about his daughter and her film. Watching it for the first time, the die-hard revolutionary realized that his little girl had felt neglected all these years.

"It was a surprise," he says in Spanish. "I always realized that my political activities could bring fatal consequences for me but never to the point of hurting my daughter's feelings. Through the movie I realized that, yes indeed, I had wrapped myself in the flag of my struggles and my ideals while turning a blind eye to my family."

The film unfolds as a revelation for her too. At one point, she literally thinks out loud as she comes to terms with her father's emotional absence and finally feels moved to take up his cause herself. It happens during a memorial service in Havana for the victims of a terrorist attack on a Cubana airliner in 1976. The crash, believed to be the work of anti-Castro Cubans trained by the CIA, killed all 73 passengers aboard, including Cuba's Olympic fencing team.

Lesnik Weisman, a single mother of a teenage son, is seen wandering in a Havana cemetery among the relatives of the victims, looking stunned. You can see a growing outrage come over her grim expression. And she understands why her father had to stand up to the right-wing Cuban Americans in Miami, including members of Congress, who continue to harbor as heroes two of the men accused of the crime, Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles.

"I am embarrassed and ashamed to live in a country where anyone thought this was OK," she says. "For the first time in my life, the American that I am begins to love the Cuban I am becoming."

Lesnik Weisman dug through family archives and historic news footage to weave together the story of her family and the complicated political history of her native country. Her father, the grandson of a Polish Jew who immigrated to Cuba, was a friend and fellow student leader with Castro before the famous revolutionary even had a beard. They had a falling out when Lesnik started aggressively opposing Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union and the summary executions of prisoners. He went into hiding, just as he used to hide Castro at his home in the early days. He went into exile in 1961, along with his wife and two daughters, Miriam and Vivien. But he found no refuge in Miami. There, he founded a popular magazine called *Réplica*, which he used to espouse détente with Cuba and condemn anti-communist extremists who were now his neighbors. Lesnik's offices were bombed 11 times over two decades, but he never backed down.

"There's no such thing as a good terrorist and a bad terrorist," he now says. "To me, they're all the same, the ones from the CIA and the ones from Osama bin Laden."

In one of the film's more chilling scenes, an unrepentant Bosch, looking old and sickly, is seen defending the bombing. "All of Cuba's planes are warplanes and therefore legitimate targets," the feeble warrior has said. In Miami, his allies declared Orlando Bosch Day and got the help of former Gov. Jeb Bush and his father, former President George H.W. Bush, to prevent his deportation over the objections of the Justice Department.

This week, as presidential candidates debated the future of Cuban-U.S. relations, Lesnik pleaded for the U.S. to stop the embargo. He points to the contradiction of friendly U.S. policy toward other communist countries, such as China and Vietnam, and makes ironic note of this week's visit to North Korea by the New York Philharmonic.

"How is it possible," he asks, "for the United States to maintain against Cuba a policy of isolation, confrontation and economic pressure while it opens the door to a country like North Korea, an old-line Stalinist regime considered one of the most closed societies in human history?"

Today, Lesnik Weisman leads a comfortable life in her Santa Monica hillside home, far removed from the Miami childhood she spent routinely checking under the family car for bombs and wondering during sleepless nights if her father would come home. There are some sad scenes in her movie when she follows her father to visit his old Cuban haunts, lugging around her camera. They stop at his former homes, stepping over the ubiquitous rubble that represents the decay of Cuba's economy. On the steps of the University of Havana, where he was a student with Castro, the stocky old fighter instantly gets involved in a drawn-out political discussion with passersby. His daughter drops back, feeling left out again.

"What is it about this place that inspires so much passion, so much longing, so much hate?" she asks. Her film helps provide the answers.

*"The Man of Two Havanas" (El Hombre de Dos Havanas) screens at 6:30 p.m. March 15 during the San Diego Latino Film Festival at the UltraStar Mission Valley Cinemas at Hazard Center, 7510 Hazard Center Road. \$9.50. Information: (619) 230-1938 or go to [www.mediaartscenter.org](http://www.mediaartscenter.org).*

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