

The Miami Herald

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

MOVIES

Father's story draws her closer to Cuba

■ The filmmaking debut of a Cuban-American woman raised in Miami is both a family portrait and a polarizing political essay.

BY RENE RODRIGUEZ
rrodriguez@miamiherald.com

NEW YORK — Vivien Lesnik Weisman was 8 years old when she went through a bout of insomnia — which turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to her.

"I would wake up in the middle of the night and climb into bed with my dad and we'd watch Ruby Keeler musicals on TV until three o'clock in the morning," Lesnik Weisman recalls about her childhood in Little Havana. "My dad was always busy doing his thing and I had never really had much time alone with him, so those late nights were very special for me."

They also helped shape her life. After studying law, political science and art history in college, Lesnik Weisman, 45, is now a filmmaker — she's so movie crazy, she uses Ennio Morricone's theme for *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* as the ring tone on her cell phone — and she traces her passion for film back to those late nights watching *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade* with her father, Max.

And it is her father — who became an intimate friend of Fidel Castro while a teenager, and whose liberal political views toward Cuba have earned him the wrath of Miami's Cuban exile groups — who became the subject of Lesnik Weisman's directorial debut, *The Man of Two Havanas*.

SHIFTING FOCUS

The documentary, which premiered last week at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, is both a biographical portrait of her father's extraordinary life and an account of Lesnik Weisman's



LATINOVISION

'THE MAN OF TWO HAVANAS': Max Lesnik, pictured with Castro, above, has earned the wrath of Miami's exiles. His daughter, director Vivien Lesnik Weisman, is pictured below left with a poster for the film.



journey to discovering her passion for her cultural heritage.

Shot over a 2½-year period, *The Man of Two Havanas* alternates between a conversational, first-person narrative in which Lesnik Weisman talks about the indifference she felt toward her birthplace while growing up in Miami's *café con leche* generation, and a more formal structure blending interviews with Max and other subjects with historical and TV news footage.

As it recounts Max's participation in the Cuban Revolution of 1958, his subsequent disillusion with Castro's government and eventual exile to Miami, and his efforts against

the U.S. embargo of the island, *The Man of Two Havanas* also becomes a political film, which has the potential to irk some South Florida viewers.

"I haven't seen the movie, but any film that is against the embargo will generate a negative reaction in Miami, since there is a significant majority here that believes that is a viable political strategy," says Alejandro Rios, director of the Cuban Cinema Series at Miami Dade College. "But we have also matured enough as a city to be able to sit down and watch a movie with that thesis and then talk about it intelligently."

Rios says when he premiered the anti-embargo doc-

umentary *Our House in Havana* in 2000 before it was aired on PBS, the reaction was "explosive, but in the form of a passionate debate. But that movie centered on a woman who lives in Washington, D.C. Max is someone who lives in Miami and is well-known here, so it makes it trickier."

Well-known within the Cuban-American community, Max published the general interest magazine *Replica* for two decades in Miami, during which time his offices were bombed 11 times by radical groups unhappy with its political commentary. He is now the director and political commentator on the news magazine show *Radio Miami*, heard on Union Radio 1450 AM from 6-7 a.m. weekdays.

"When Vivien first came to me with the idea for the movie, I went along with it mostly to please her," Max Lesnik says. "I didn't believe there was a story there that was more about a family than politics. But when I saw the movie, I realized the politics really didn't come first. It is my story, but it is also a story about a daughter and a father and her process of picking up the torch and starting to identify as a Cuban for the first time in her life."

MIAMI SCREENING?

Lesnik Weisman says despite the polarizing effect her father has on a segment of Miami's exile groups, she is eager to screen the film in South Florida, but is concentrating first on hitting the film festival circuit and securing a national theatrical release.

"I think some people will love the movie and some people will hate it," she speculates. "The Miami community is not a monolith and there is a silent majority that is probably not in favor of the embargo — meaning they don't really care, because it's not at the forefront of their minds, they're not well-

versed on what it means."

Lesnik Weisman, who lives in Santa Monica, says that pretty much describes the person she used to be before she made the movie. "I grew up not really caring about the Cuban issue, despite being the daughter of Max Lesnik," she says. "Hopefully, politics aside, the movie will be able to tap into my generation of Cuban Americans in the same way, people who feel Cuba is a part of their life, but it is not as integral to them as it is to their parents."

The Man of Two Havanas ends with footage of Lesnik Weisman being interviewed by TV news crews while filming her father at a political demonstration. For a brief moment, as a reporter asks about her personal stance on the embargo, Lesnik Weisman speaks passionately and eloquently against U.S. policy toward the island, while Max, caught at the edge of the frame and unaware he's being filmed, looks on smiling and beaming with obvious pride.

It's a perfect ending for a movie about a woman who, in the process of getting to know her father better, ends up discovering a passion inside her she did not know existed.

"When I started filming, my mother was always saying 'no cojas lucha con la película' (don't fret too much over the movie) because no one cares about Cuba," Lesnik Weisman says. "She has seen my father dedicate his life to this cause, and she doesn't want to see me go down that road and put a lot of emotional investment in the success or failure of this film. So I listened to her. This is the movie I wanted to make, I did the best I could, and now it's more of a spiritual conviction than anything else. If I let things run their course, I think the movie will find its place."

! MIAMIHERALD.COM: Watch the trailer for 'The Man of Two Havanas.' Click on Today's Extras.