

Sundance 2020: Epicentro marvelous, intriguing portrait of Cuba's 'little prophets'

By **Les Roka** - January 26, 2020

Introducing her 1995 anthology, *Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba*, Cuban-American anthropologist and author Ruth Behar wrote that her collection is "a meeting place, a castle in the sand, an imaginary homeland. It is a space for reconciliation, speculation and renewal."

Receiving its Sundance premiere, the documentary *Epicentro*, directed by award-winning filmmaker Hubert Sauper, achieves with equally compelling effect a similar goal in the film. It offers American viewers a more balanced perspective than what international affairs reporters and scholars typically achieve in their simplistic assessments.



A still from *Epicentro* by Hubert Sauper, an official selection of the World Cinema Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute and Hubert Sauper.

With a common sense of history, his passion for the chosen medium of his art is the pursuit of authentic voices that are the counterpoint to misguided conventional

Sauper, in *Epicentro*, illuminates many fresh perspectives about an island nation paradoxical as it is exotic and unique in its sociopolitical place in the global con

The voices featured are prominently those of young people in Cuba, pragmatic, dreamers who are the first generation in the country to experience their lives in the new era. Sauper calls them "little prophets." They are astute about the historical legacy that continues to shape their formative years: the revolutionary principles that brought Castro to power more than 60 years ago and a complex relationship with the U.S. with the events surrounding the 1898 explosion of the USS Maine.

The title *Epicentro* concisely describes the frame for Sauper's thematic epiphany. In the Americas, Cuba is the geopolitical nexus of the slave trade, the era of colonialist imperialism, and the advent of a global community and marketplace. He sets up the story of Cuba's own desire for Utopianism. Three pillars of Sauper's inspiration for the film make sense after viewing the film: Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Johannes Vermeer's *Utopia* (2014) and the development of early cinema along with the acknowledgment of propaganda power. A prominent example featured in the documentary is George Méliès' film *A Trip to The Moon*.

The young Cubans know their history — and not just the revolution leading to the new Cuba. This includes the sinking of the USS Maine, which precipitated the Spanish-American War, the culminating event as U.S. forces raised the flag on the hills overlooking Guantánamo Bay, an area that since then has remained under American control.

The 'little prophets,' for example, know quite a lot about a bit of U.S. history that they could recite immediately or recognize from history. The reference is the Platt Amendment of 1901, which stipulated the conditions for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Cuba, ending American colonial dominance over the island that would last until the Cuban Re





Hubert Sauper, director of *Epicentro*, an official selection of the World Cinema [Competition] at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute

These 'little prophets' are not just smart but they also are rich in song, dance and talents. Their hunger to find outlets for creative expression is just as intense as American peers experience but these young Cubans also do not have the same social media. Their instincts for cinema are innate, and they absorb and process early cinema to which they are introduced. They are fascinated by Sauper's iPhone these 'little prophets' create miniature videos on the spot, impressing the director with their natural abilities.

Joining Sauper in the film is the Spanish-English actor Oona Castilla Chaplin, the

actor Geraldine Chaplin and the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin. She also is the granddaughter of Eugene O'Neill. Chaplin interacts with these 'little prophets' offering acting tips. She also sings in the film, accenting the outstanding music by Zsuzsanna Varkonyi and Maximilian 'Twig' Turnbull.

Sauper also foreshadows the impending impact of the climate crisis, achieving this through spoken text. Instead, scenes of waves crashing along the Cuban shores with an ferocity appear throughout the film. This is why Schmidl's book is connected to Sauper's thematic intentions in *Epicentro*. As Schmidl writes, "The term of efficacy (doing things right) needs to be extended to that of effectiveness ('doing the right thing' not remain stuck in doing the wrong things right.)"

In the U.S., what we often hear in politics regarding Cuba is influenced heavily by the Cuban-American lobby, based in Miami. This lobby overshadows the voices of those in Havana or elsewhere on the island. Of course, tourism in Cuba has grown recently and echoes the vestiges of colonialism and imperialism that caused the problems in point captured in several scenes in the film). Tourists see but they cannot comprehend the roots of the scenes and icons they encounter during their vacations.

Sauper's loving portrait of these Cuban 'little prophets' opens the door to a true perspective that offers to dispel the rumors, myths, propaganda and the general misunderstanding many Americans still have about Cuba.

Les Roka

I am a native of Toledo, Ohio, having received my Ph.D. in journalism and mass communication from Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism in 2002. After teaching at Utah State University and the University of Utah, I have worked in public relations for a variety of organizations including a major metropolitan newspaper, an osteopathic medical center, a university, and a community college. When it comes to intellectual curiosity, I venture into as many areas as possible, whether it's about music criticism, film journalism, the practice of public relations in a Web 2.0 world and the soon-

landscape, or how public debates are formed about many issues especially in the public arena. As a Salt Lake City resident, I currently write and edit a blog called The Utah Review that provides an entertaining, informative, and provocative look at Salt Lake City and the surrounding metropolitan area. I also have been the U.S. editorial advisor for an online design and architecture publication based in The Netherlands. And, I use social media tools such as blogging, networking with journalists and experts, and staying current on the latest in culture and news. I also have been a regular monthly contributor to a Utah-based magazine and I have recently conducted a variety of editing projects involving authors from throughout the country and the world, including Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Cyprus, the United Kingdom, France, and Japan. I'm also a classically trained musician and have spent more than 15 years in a string quartet, being involved in more than 40 recordings.

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