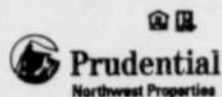




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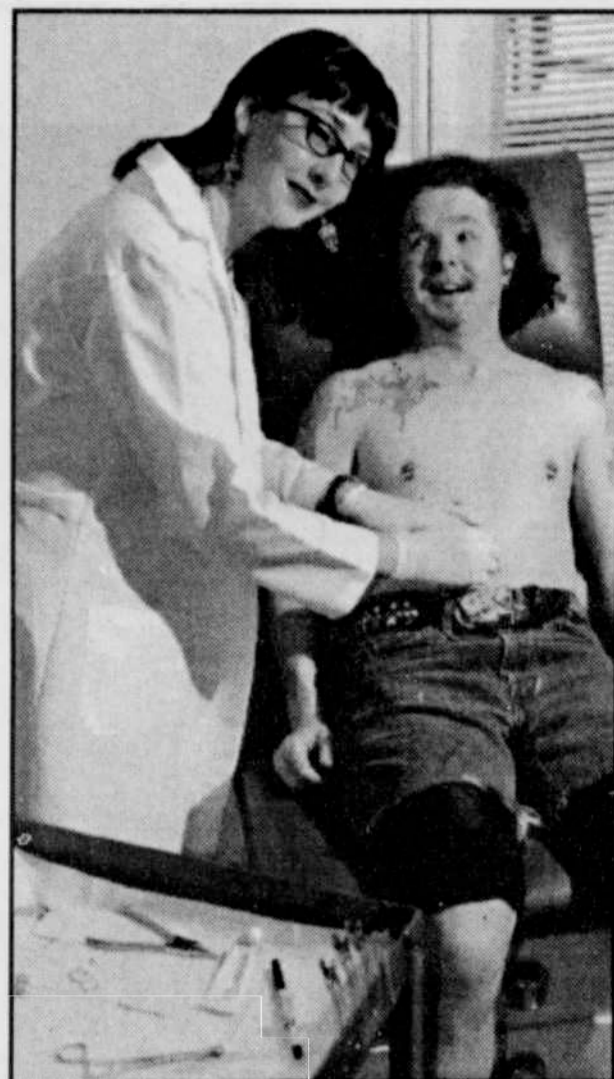
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CINEMA

Drag queen comrades

Screening of documentary about female impersonators in Havana will benefit Cascade AIDS Project

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

In 1961, diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba came to an end. Since then, the island nation and the U.S. embargo intended to isolate its communist government have largely been out of sight and out of mind.

Elizabeth Atly, a representative of the organization Campaign for Peace with Cuba, hopes to change that. One of the first steps involves the Cascade AIDS Project: The Campaign for Peace with Cuba and Speak to Your Brothers, a project of CAP, are cosponsoring a benefit Portland premiere of the film *Mariposas en el Andamio* (*Butterflies on the Scaffold*), a documentary about a troupe of gay female impersonators who win the support of their Havana neighborhood community center, allowing them to hold cabaret performances.

The film, directed by Margaret Gilpin and Luis Phillippe Bernaza, is dedicated to Cuba's efforts to find a cure for AIDS.

Though Atly says the Campaign for Peace with Cuba "doesn't toe any party lines," its main objective is to maintain Cuba's sovereignty while lifting the embargo imposed upon Cuba by the United States during John F. Kennedy's presidency. The Campaign for Peace with Cuba, says Atly, holds that the embargo subverts its own purpose of economic salvation for Cuba by causing undue economic hardship for the Cuban people.

"That Cuba even has running automobiles is due to Cuban ingenuity," says Atly.

Despite the campaign's seemingly good intentions, the topic of Cuba still raises questions and doubts about civil rights, free speech and repression, particularly for people in the queer community and other oppressed ethnic and/or religious communities.

Juan Carlos Espinosa, a gay activist and director of Cuban studies at the University of Miami, for example, finds it ironic that U.S. queers might be supportive of Castro's government—although he's a fan of *Mariposas en el Andamio*.

"There are different ways of reading the film," Espinosa admits. "I suppose you could read it to be some sort of celebration of Cuban tolerance." He adds, however, "It was filmed in a country where there's a military dictatorship and almost no individual expression."

Espinosa, who considers himself a progressive, also says it's absurd that any AIDS relief organizations might look kindly on Castro's government in light of the forced HIV testing and quarantine that ended in 1993—a course of action he insists "not even [North Carolina's Republican Sen.] Jesse Helms could've dreamed of."

Alan Rose, CAP's manager of HIV prevention education programs, says CAP doesn't regard the screening as a political event. "We're supportive of anything that increases knowledge of HIV infection among the people living in Cuba—not only gay/bisexual people,

but all people," says Rose.

While Espinosa shares Atly's view that the embargo is counterproductive and inflicts the greatest hardships on the poorest Cubans, he says that groups like Seattle's Queers for Cuba "seem to be something that's very West Coast," adding that more people who've left Cuba—especially gay men and lesbians—now live on the U.S. East Coast, providing "communities of victims who can challenge this discourse."

Though Castro's revolution of the late 1950s allegedly broke down much of Cuba's oppression based on race and gender, the influence of the traditional Latin American culture of that time, complete with its focus on traditional gender roles, remained dominant in

Cuba. During the mid-1970s the



A scene from the film *Mariposas en el Andamio*

notion of homosexual-as-pariah may have begun to lose its credence in most Western Hemisphere metropolitan areas,

but Cuba's policies remained rigid far into the 1980s.

Atly acknowledges that "things weren't always so great for homosexuals in Cuba." In fact, in the early days after the 1959 Cuban revolution, gays and others who were deemed "anti-social" elements were forced into notorious work camps.

However, recent Cuban history indicates the extent to which things have improved on the civil rights front: the 1986 re-evaluation of national sex education policies; the halt in 1993 of mandatory quarantine for AIDS patients; and the queer-positive film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which was made in Cuba in 1993 under the auspices of the government cultural agency, ICAIC, and became a major event not just in Cuban popular culture but in Cuban society.

Espinosa counters that Cuba may not be as oppressive toward the queer community as it once was, but warns, "In Cuba there is no rule of law—there are privileges that are granted by the regime and just as easily taken away." What progress the Cuban government has made in its treatment of queer Cubans, says Espinosa, are "small, little gasps of air and pretty meaningless.... The people who committed those crimes in the past are still in power."

Atly's view, relative to Espinosa's, seems either more optimistic or naive, depending upon an observer's perspective.

"The Cuban revolution isn't static," says Atly. "It's not considered to be a *fait accompli*; if something's not working, they want to make it work."

■ *MARIPOSAS EN EL ANDAMIO* will be shown at 5th Ave. Cinema, 510 S.W. Hall St., on Thursday, Jan. 21, at 7 p.m. There is a suggested donation of \$5, with proceeds to benefit the Cascade AIDS Project.

WILL O'BRYAN contributed to this report.

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