

Néstor Almendros' Days of Heaven are Finally Here

By Mario E. Beguiristain

En el camarógrafo cubano-español Néstor Almendros se combinan un talento asombroso y una cantidad de paciencia y tenacidad que rendirían honor al legendario Job. Almendros, ganador del Oscar de cinematografía por su película "Days of Heaven", se ha sobrepuesto a una serie de obstáculos que hubieran vencido a alguien menos valiente y menos decidido a practicar su arte. Por ejemplo, ha tenido que exilarse tres veces en su vida. Cuando tenía 15 años, su familia se mudó de España para Cuba, a raíz del establecimiento del franquismo. Luego Almendros se exiló de la Cuba de Batista, a la que regresó, años más tarde, animado por el triunfo de la revolución. Pero el joven pronto se decepcionó del socialismo cubano y terminó yéndose de su país adoptivo nuevamente. Procedió a hacerse de una magnífica reputación como camarógrafo en Europa, al colaborar con genios del cine como François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer y Barbet Schroeder. Su fama europea le ha traído mucho prestigio entre los cineastas norteamericanos, y es ahora, por fin, que comienza su carrera aquí.

When Néstor Almendros picked up his well-deserved Oscar as best cinematographer for *Days of Heaven*, TV audiences all over the world heard him make his acceptance speech in Spanish. "I wanted to salute the 15 million Spanish speaking people in this country," he said, "to share the moment with them and let them know that one hasn't forgotten one's language



Almendros: A sensitive eye for nature. • Creando armonías visuales.

or cultural origins." Those words endeared Almendros to Latinos here, who up until then hardly knew of him.

There is a certain sense of serenity about the tall, dark and trim Almendros that is only broken when he enthusiastically speaks about his passion for films, which has always been the driving force in his life. The road that led him to his Oscar and his position as one of the most sought-after cameramen of the international cinema is marked with the courage and determination of the artist as survivor—a man fighting against all odds to practice his art.

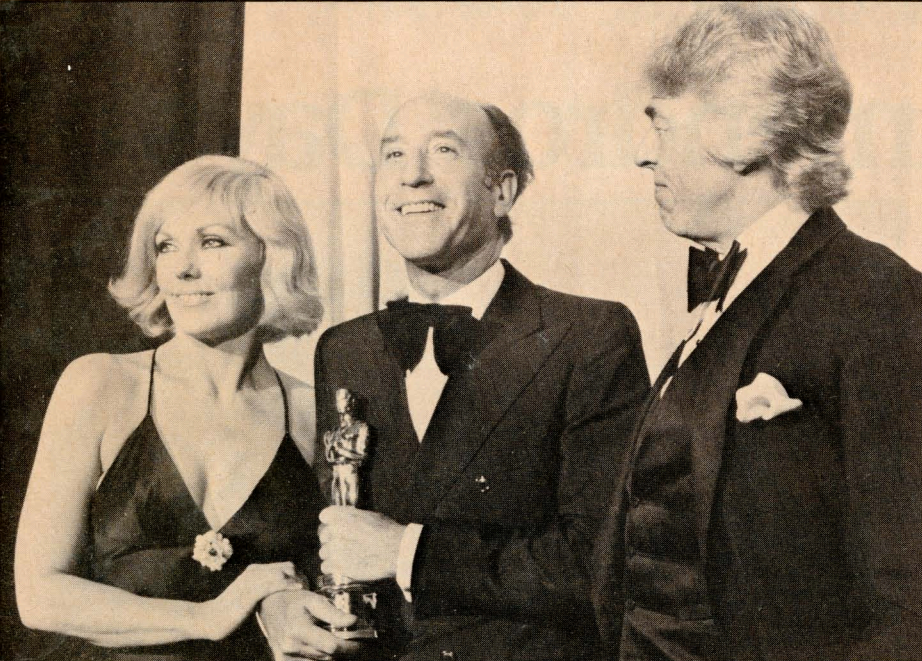
Almendros, born in Barcelona, Spain, 48 years ago, ended up in Cuba at the age of 15 when his Loyalist father fled with his family from Franco's Spain. "We all embraced Cuban citizenship with a lot of enthusiasm and also a certain amount of practicality, since at the time (late Forties) Cuban immigration laws were very strict and it was almost impossible for a foreigner to hold a steady job," says Almendros as he reminisced about days long gone. His parents and a brother are still living in Cuba, and after 18 years of separation he was able to visit them this summer thanks to the relaxed travel restrictions to and from the island.

For a man who has suffered political exile three times in his life, first from Franco's Spain, then from Batista's Cuba and finally from Castro's Cuba, Almendros appears rather unfazed by it all. He has learned to take obstacles in

stride rather than being set back by them. On his way to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to have his name engraved on his Oscar, Almendros drove past a department store in Los Angeles' Miracle Mile district. "I used to work there," he says. "When I had to leave Cuba in 1956 because of Batista, I came here hoping to find some work in the film industry. But I didn't know a soul and it was a truly impenetrable industry at the time. So I became a stockboy in the shoe department at Ohrbach's and lived in a small apartment in the Fairfax area."

He went on to study filmmaking in Italy and later on at New York's City College, where he fondly remembers as his professors Hans Richter and Arthur Knight. While in New York in the Fifties, Almendros fell in with a group of "avant-garde" experimental filmmakers led by Jonas Mekas and Maya Deren, who would later become the founders of the American underground film movement of the Sixties. They made films on a shoestring, and their approach was poetic, lyrical and sensual. All they needed was a camera, film and inspiration to produce some outstanding works which were totally different from anything that was being shown in the commercial cinemas. One can still see the effect of this influence in Almendros today as he

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His well-deserved Oscar has opened new doors in Hollywood. • Ya ha recibido varias invitaciones para fotografiar películas en los Estados Unidos.

strives for simplicity in his camerawork. He frowns on the army of technicians and arsenal of bright artificial lights that have become the standard in Hollywood. Instead, he prefers to use natural and available light whenever possible "to create the beauty that must be in front of the camera before you can photograph it."

With the fall of Batista, Almendros returned to Cuba to join his adopted country in a time of joyous celebration. "In those early days," he says, "the revolution created a cultural explosion and an atmosphere of freedom and experimentation in all the arts." The foundations for a national cinema were laid down with the creation of the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC), and Almendros, full of projects, hopes and expectations, loaned his own camera equipment to the Institute and went to work for it. But the assignments he got were far from stimulating. Not happy making didactic films about the tomato harvest and water conservation techniques, Almendros set out on his own to make a beautiful short entitled *Gente en la playa*, which was filled with delightful vignettes of Cubans of all sizes and colors frolicking on the beaches around Havana. It was banned for a year before it was eventually shown on national television. But the Film Institute did not distribute the picture since it had not been commissioned and it did not want to encourage independent productions. Almendros left the Institute and went to work first in TV and later as a film critic for *Bohemia* magazine. He left Cuba in 1961, exiled once again just three years after the revolution.

Almendros settled eventually in

Paris. Showing the same ability to tune in to his surroundings as he had shown years before in New York, he fell in with a group of filmmakers from the French New Wave: Barbet Schroeder, Eric Rohmer and François Truffaut. Soon he was photographing their films. His approach to filmmaking was totally compatible with theirs. Used to working with little equipment, in a fast and straightforward manner, Almendros brought a surge of new blood and enthusiasm to the tail end of the French New Wave.

For Schroeder he photographed the films *More*, *The Valley*, *Idi Amin Dada* and *Koko, the Talking Gorilla*, all of which called for a documentary approach and were photographed under adverse conditions in such far-off and unlikely places as New Guinea, Uganda and the San Francisco Zoo.

For Rohmer, Almendros became an indispensable collaborator, photographing all of his films—*My Night at Maud's*, *Claire's Knee*, *Chloë in the Afternoon*, *The Marquise of O* and most recently *Perceval*, a film noted for emulating the beauty of medieval illustrations. Rohmer's intimate film style concentrated on the use of close-ups in which the actors spoke long monologues on their tenuous amorous relationships, and had a luminescent quality that turned the commonplace settings of Paris into images of intrinsic natural beauty.

His association with Truffaut dates back to one of the famed French director's best films, *The Wild Child*. Using black and white film, Almendros conjured up pastoral images of such lush beauty that the lack of color was never

missed and actually became an asset. His use of composition and natural light in interior scenes were reminiscent of the paintings of the Dutch master Vermeer. Other films for Truffaut included *Two English Girls*, *The Man Who Loved Women*, *The Green Room* and *Love on the Run*.

With all of Almendros' successes in Europe, it was only a matter of time until Hollywood took notice. The new crop of American directors brought up on foreign "art" films, most of which he had photographed, wanted Almendros to put their images on celluloid. But the strict regulations of the Hollywood trade unions kept Almendros from working in the U.S. He was able to accept Terrence Malick's offer to photograph *Days of Heaven* because the film, although it took place in the U.S., was scheduled to be shot in Canada, outside the jurisdiction of the American film unions. Likewise, he took on *Goin' South*, the western directed by and starring Jack Nicholson, because it was shot entirely in Durango, Mexico.

As soon as he got his Oscar, Almendros received an invitation to join the American Society of Cinematographers and was deluged with offers to make more films in the U.S. He recently finished working on his third American film, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a bittersweet story of divorce starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep, filmed mostly in New York. He is now embarking on his fourth, *The Blue Lagoon*, a story about a boy and a girl shipwrecked on a South Pacific island.

The Blue Lagoon seems to be an appropriate picture for Almendros, since there will be plenty of lush tropical beauty for this imagemaker to capture on film. "But it's funny," he says. "I have a reputation for making beautiful pictures with natural landscapes, but I am not at all interested in nature per se, only in the effect that man has on nature. In *Days of Heaven* there were all those beautiful wheat fields, but what excited me the most were the granaries, the silos, the warehouses, the train tracks cutting through that sea of gold and that beautiful house in the middle of the prairie."

It is to the credit of the Academy that it chose to recognize the work of Néstor Almendros, especially since this cinematographer was an outsider to Hollywood circles and had often been denied permission to work in this country. "It's very pleasant," he said, "after all these years to finally come into Hollywood through the big door." □