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LAFF 2011: MOVIE REVIEW "UNFINISHED SPACES" – CUBA'S ART AND REVOLUTION

Monday, June 20th, 2011

Written by: Jackson Truax

Like many of the film's showing at this year's Los Angeles Film Festival, *Unfinished Spaces* is a feature directorial debut, this one being from the directing team of Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray. Both filmmakers are names to keep an eye out for, as *Unfinished Spaces* masterfully blends art, history, and politics into a film that offers something for audiences members interested in any or all of the three.

The film centers around three architects, artist Ricardo Porro, Venetian-influenced Roberto Gottardi, and urbanist Vittorio Garatti. After the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro commissions the three to design "the most beautiful of art schools in the world." They do just that, and the buildings become the bustling National Art Schools and a revolutionary paradise, only to be closed and condemned when the revolution became Sovietized, all before being completed.

Much of the success of *Unfinished Spaces* comes from Nahmias and Murray's ability to tightly focus their energy and story into 84 compelling minutes, and being willing to not only constantly take the viewer into a new place dramatically, but someplace they may not have expected to go. *Unfinished Spaces* is a film that is about Cuba without taking a political stance. It is a film that shows intimate and unseen sides of Fidel Castro, without painting him as either Sinner or Saint.

Nahmias and Murray leave themselves and any narration out of the film, instead letting these buildings and these architects tell their story. Porro, Garatti, and Gottardi are as open and honest as can be imagined, wanting to tell all of their stories in what they know may be their final years. Regardless of politics, it's hard not to see these men as living treasures, both for what they accomplished as artists and as survivors of the political prosecution of the Sovietized revolution.

Murray served as Director of Photography and crafted what may be the most visually breathtaking documentary in recent memory. It would be easy for one to accuse the film of being visually stunning not because of the photography, but of what's being filmed. However, Murray not only clearly has an endless love and intimate understanding of these *Unfinished Spaces*, but he uses the camera to convey that love to the audience.

This all culminates in a film that is in equal parts inspirational and heart-breaking. Though one watching the film can't help but be moved to live in one's own artistry, tears are shed for works unfinished and one's own broken ambitions and fragmented dreams. The film ultimately serves as a plea to see these buildings preserved and/or completed, as they now face new appreciation and setbacks in equal measure. *Unfinished Spaces* conveys an ultimate message of bittersweet hope.

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