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Vando Martinelli, Cuba, its Culture, its Cinema and the Gibara Film Festival

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Cuban culture owes a lot to Italian Vando Martinelli. He first went to Cuba in February 1957, for an interview granted by Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra to U.S. journalist Herbert Matthews. Vando thus discovered Cuba and its Revolution.

Some years later, after the triumph of the Revolution, he would frequently visit the island until he decided to settle down and live permanently in Cuba. He has worked unfailingly as a cultural activist, journalist, and official of the Communist Party of Cuba as well as the Italian Communist Party. It is quite usual to see his name in the acknowledgments of leaflets and catalogs in multiple cultural events.

In a few months Vando will be 84 years old, although he still has the spirit and strength to organize and collaborate with the projects and ideas he still defends as much as in the 1960s when Cuba needed to boost tourism and he brought in the first Italian tour operator agency: Ital Turism.

“Over the years I managed to attract almost 200,000 Italian tourists”, Vando affirms. He is one of the indispensable organizers and agents of the International Low-Budget Film Festival.

“I am a journalist, but we can say I am the first tour operator that Cuba had. I have had enough of journalism, but not of culture: I’m always involved in some cultural project”, he said, laughing, as the organizer of the gala for the First Anniversary of Playa Girón.

Founder of the cultural organization ARCI<sup>[1]</sup> -both in Italy and Cuba - he has brought Italian artists to the island. The most recent Italian artist who came was singer and composer Zucchero, the protagonist of a hugely attended concert at the Higher Institute of Arts in Havana.

“I was a correspondent for Panorama newspaper but when Berlusconi came to power he fired me because of my political convictions”, he detailed.

*When did you begin your collaboration with Cuba?*

- I belonged to the Communist Party of Italy where I was an official. Previously, I had organized trips to socialist countries. Then in the 1960s, Cuba needed tourists and I brought the first Italian tour operator to this country: ItalTurism. Over the years, I managed to bring almost 200,000 Italian tourists here (...) In 1961 I organized the gala for the 1st Anniversary of Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs), and since then I have not stopped bringing Italian groups and taking many Cuban artists to Italy, because I have always believed in the cultural exchange between both nations. I have brought many cultural groups here, and I'm a founder of ARCI association, both in Italy and in Cuba.

*How do you consider the relations between Cuba and Italy?*

- They have always been very good, although we should not forget that Italy belongs to the European Economic Community. It seems that the government (of Italy) wants to improve its economic links with Cuba. I hope this is the case because that exchange would be wonderful and important for both nations. The Communist Party in Italy no longer exists, but the general opinion about Cuba in my country is good.

*When did you become an activist for Cuban culture?*

- The first thing I did was – as you are aware - to organize the Playa Girón anniversary. The second significant thing was in 1972, in the middle of the *quinquenio gris*<sup>[2]</sup> or *pavonato*. I took the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* (National Folkloric Ensemble) to Italy. They were 92 artists who performed 32 times in different cities with extraordinary success. I founded the Ítalo Calvino Prize. I have promoted multiple cultural exchanges between Cuba and Italy. I have brought several musicians such as Jovanotti, who loves this country so much that he baptized it in one of his songs as the “navel of the world”. He came the first time in summer. The music school was closed and he wanted to see the performances of young Cuban artists. They all met and played together. I remember that special moment, he felt very happy and donated them all his instruments. There has been a lot of collaboration so it would be very long to mention them all in this interview.

*You have collaborated a lot with the Cuban cinema, how has your relation been during these years with the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC)?*

- I was very much linked to this genre, always via ARCI. I have been very present since the foundation of ICAIC. I remember my first meeting with Saúl Yelín, who gave me all the silk screen posters of the movies of the time. I organized a great exhibition of posters in Modena, my city. At that time, Cuban posters together with Polish posters were the most famous in the world. With ARCI, I organized several Cuban cinema retrospectives in Italy and Italian cinema in Cuba. I began in the 1970s with these exchanges; Vittorio Gassman's showcase, who came to Havana with his movies as well as Giuseppe Tornatore, who came recently, just to mention two examples.

*Humberto Solás, the Low-Budget Film Festival and Gibara*<sup>[3]</sup>...

- We met in 1975 at Humberto Peña's house, the plastic artist, who at that time worked at Casa de las Américas. We became good friends and we were always in contact. Then the moment of low-budget cinema arrived, Humberto came here and explained everything to me and I was very interested. All my life I had wanted to give an easy-to-use camera to indigenous peoples in Australia or in the Amazon, so that they could film themselves and in this way see results that would for sure not be the same as if a European had filmed it. I had always been motivated by alternative cinema and immediately joined the project that I have since supported at every stage, both in financing and in public and political relations. I have always been faithful to this event so much so that my friend Lázara Herrera, the widow of Santiago Álvarez, wants to recruit me for her documentary festival, but I always tell her that this is enough already. This festival was possible thanks to Omar González, who was very supportive of Humberto's idea: this utopia of low-budget cinema with scarce resources, but rich in ideas and artistic values. The event became a party that takes on every artistic manifestation. There is a project of the Ministry of Culture to transform Gibara into a second Trinidad<sup>[4]</sup>, and do not forget that Guardalavaca<sup>[5]</sup> is a great tourist attraction as well. In Gibara, they finished a very good hotel and now they are finishing another one; each room will have the name of a film landmark in order to pay homage to the cinema that has given so much to the city. I believe that Cuban cinema retrospectives can be organized during the whole year and also musical groups can go and play so that Gibara will shine all year round.

*In a few days you will go to Gibara, what can you say about the next Festival?*

- I think that it will be as good as the previous one that Lester Hamlet also directed. I was the one who proposed Lester and he was approved unanimously and the last event was one really one of the best. The same day Humberto died, I called Carlos Barba, his pupil and told him: It is your turn to do something to pay homage to the teacher, I will finance everything. It cost me 16,000 euros, paid in long installments by even selling my socks, but it was a necessary homage I had to pay to a great friend. The film was completed and we went in January to exhibit it in Gibara. Some ICAIC officials and actresses Daisy Granados and Adela Legrá went there. In spite of the financing problems we realized that we could not stop organizing the event. The challenge was to get the money. The next one will be a modest festival due to lack of economic resources, but organized with a lot of desire and love.

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