Buenas Noches

January 1, 2001 By Jaime Manrique

It felt bittersweet the other night to see Julian Schnabel's spirited and beautiful adaptation of Reinaldo Arenas' great memoir *Before Night Falls*. Ironically, the screening was held at Disney's luxurious New York City headquarters on Park Avenue, the last place this gay, HIV positive Cuban exile, who committed suicide in his apartment across town in December 1990, would ever have expected to be seen. Arenas suffered the ravages of AIDS without health insurance and died in poverty. At his death, this genius writer was an outcast among the traditionally pro-Fidel Latin American literati.

Schnabel's *Before Night Falls*, which hits theaters this month, is an honorable attempt to translate Arenas' tumultuous life story: his childhood as a *goajiro peasant*; his adolescence, when he was swept away by a revolution that put an end to the corrupt regime of dictator Fulgencio Batista; Arenas' birth as an untutored writer and his picaresque adventures as a gay man; his incarceration and torture for being a homosexual in the notorious El Morro dungeon; and his escape from Cuba in 1980 during the Mariel boat lift. But the movie only briefly deals with Arenas' 10 years in New York, where he fell ill.

Schnabel, the painter-turned-filmmaker who also directed *Basquiat*, is clearly enraptured by film's ability to capture rhapsodic images: a sugarcane field being burned at night as white birds fly through the flames; a lovely exchange of soap balls swinging from prisoners' cells like hundreds of pocket watches. One exhilarating sequence follows a failed escape from Cuba in a hot-air balloon. As the camera looks down on the city, we feel the desperation of those who tried to flee this island jail.

The Spanish hottie Javier Bardem, in the lead role, achieves an uncanny transformation. In profile, he bears an eerie resemblance to Arenas, and he mimics to perfection the way Arenas walked with slouching shoulders -- as if carrying the weight of the world. Wasting away in solitary, tortured and soiled, he looks as spooked as a German expressionist actor of the silent era -- an unforgettable image of pain and powerlessness.

We love tragic heroes. But it's never long before these figures are co-opted by the machinery of cultural commerce and turned into icons. I'm afraid that *Before Night Falls* signals Arenas' adoption by the heterosexual cultural establishment, whose first step will be to desex him to make him more marketable.

Now that he's dead, Arenas cannot be the disruptive presence he was when alive. Schnabel has

muted Arenas' orgiastic sexuality -- perhaps this writer's most important theme. Though the movie is gay friendly, it's also chaste. There is no hint here of the man who fucked animals, trees and fruits, and boasted of having had sex with 5,000 men. His relationship with his friend Lázaro (played by Olivier Martinez) becomes platonic: The two never even kiss. Although we see Arenas' face covered with Kaposi's sarcoma, the word AIDS is never mentioned. The film is, however, a lacerating denunciation of the psychotic society created by the Cuban revolution. Best of all, it will likely help create a wider readership for the work of a unique writer lost to AIDS despair.

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