

PORTFOLIO

Film makers meet audience at local screenings

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT

Special to the STAR

Many of today's visual artists cease to paint or sculpt in order to produce "art povera" which includes such manifestations as conceptual art, process art, ecological art, teatro mundo, habitats, happenings, etc. Art uses available "poor" but powerfully expressive materials to visually dramatize the human condition in today's world.

Since the art work produced in time disappears significantly into nothingness, the only records which remain may be documents such as photos and movies. Film is a tempting visual medium which adds time itself to the other plastic elements. Many of the best painters stay with it, amongst them our own Luis Maisonet, a painter who directed the film "Intolerancia" for the Division of Community Education and has photographed and written others.

In the name of those painters, I felt impelled to cover the recent (March 27 to April 2) "Week of the Puerto Rican Film" at the Institute of Culture, which I believe was a success not so much because of the quality of the film so far produced in Puerto Rico but because of the discussions which came afterwards between the audience and the film makers.

My conclusions about the whole experience are optimistic: we have a humble and nostalgic though lazy past in the very social field of film making since 1912. It is a past marred by too much improvisation, individualism and egotistical infighting, including built-in bogey-men like colonial excuses for our failures. But the present late-1970 young professionals are becoming awake to the power of a technological peer group within any tribe. If they hold fast to their evolving plans we will definitely have a future in film art, with or without government aid. To start with, they have a spokesman and historian in Jose Antonio Torres, who wrote the useful history of Puerto Rico's cinema efforts to present this film "festival".

A consensus is growing amongst the above peers against government aid. "It's time we put our own pants," they say. Or: "Art has to be done by us or it will be done-in by them."

Puerto Rico had very ominous beginnings in cinematography as witnessed by the titles of our first three films made around 1916 by the photographer Rafael J. Colorado and pharmacist Antonio Capella: "Por la Hembra y el Gallo" ("For Woman and Fighting Cock"), "Milagro de la Virgen" ("The Virgin's Miracle") and "Mafia en Puerto Rico".

Pertinently, our latest 1978 Puerto Rican



Above, a documentary film about island life back in the good old days, is shot in Highland Park.

commercial film is "Los Machos" by Tony Rigus.

"Woman," "Cock," "Virgin" and "Mafia" are really heavy as macho symbols, and as for "Milagro" that's something we always expect with new ventures.

Those symbols have pursued our film efforts since. Women and virgins are ever pregnant themes; most of our independent efforts expecting a miracle ended in cock-fights between producers and directors or actors and "Mafia" distributors; thus each of our film efforts petered out.

Only Juan Emilio Viguie Cajas kept at it consistently from 1912 until the late '40's. His news shorts and documentaries are Mafia-proof and his family workshop method of operation most economical. His son, Juan Emilio, with newspaperman Manuel Navas and writer Salvador Tio, continued the operation on and off into the 50's and 60'. The documentary of Piner's inauguration as governor is still good in color and straight camera work with no tricks.

"Paloma del Monte," directed by poet Luis Llorens Torres in 1917, met another kind of bogey-man: real war, no virgin film was available.

"Amor Tropical" started in 1919 with Puerto Rican capital furnished by "the Gonzalez brothers" (fittingly with no given name), and with all-American actors and technicians except for Viguie, failed in the U.S. market for which it was produced at too great a cost, and the company failed because

of a "cockfight" between the two brothers. However, they did mount a good film laboratory in Hato Rey near the present Clinica Julia.

Pragmatic Viguie, no customer of Julia's, bought part of the above equipment to produce for three decades his news shorts and documentaries such as "La Colectiva" in the early 30's. In 1934 he produced "Romance tropical," Puerto Rico's first full-length film which was a reasonable hit here but was fought over by Viguie and the actors: the "cockfight" was due to Viguie's family workshop techniques: children don't get paid directly, but the actors thought otherwise and the whole creature floundered. Ever since then, don't go to any Viguie wit crazy-fool ideas for films other than those with straight camera work and straight facts.

In 1938 and 1939, Rafael Ramos Cobian went to Mexico and Hollywood with his capital to produce "Mis Dos Amores" and "Los Hijos Mandan" both with Puerto Rican star Blanca de Castejon.

The star system still works reasonably well in commercial films, as witnessed by the various successful films produced around comedian Machuca in the mid-sixties by Pakira Films formed by Paquito Cordero, Kike Pedreira and Jose Raul Ramirez. They are nothing but grade B film fare: a string of skits or anecdotes, as witnessed by "El Curandero del Pueblo" which we saw this past week. No serious character development is tried, no profound issues are probed except

superficially, the whole narrative stops when a comedy skit warrants it or the two young lovers sing. Also, the camera work is straight-on, with little variety and less imagination.

Similar grade B fare are co-productions featuring stars from two or three countries; each star is billed in his or her country, to draw the public. Both Pakira Films and Damian Rosa tried this gimmick around the late sixties and are now inactive. Cordero claims that it is because blatant sex became popular and he stopped producing films; also, movie houses began to close down all over the world due to television, the latest bogey of all...or is it?

Similar grade B fare based on the gangster movie was begun in 1968 by Anthony Felton's "Correa Cotto" and others and revived in 1975 with two films on Tono Bicicleta. This week we saw the 1969 "La Palomilla" by Efraim Lopez Neri and "Arocho y Clemente" by Miguel Angel Alvarez. They are typical.

Producer-director Lopez Neri and Alvarez had to work directly with the terrible bogey-men with the money. For example, the boggys demanded, under threat of stopping the money flow, that scenes with sex be put into the Lopez Neri film because sex was rampant then in the movie world even when it was not necessary. "La Palomilla" is fast paced enough and it hints on dire conditions in our prison system without really showing them except for the eye-filling police brutality. The criminal's retirement is not as believable or evident in the film as in real life, and no real enthusiasm or even empathy is produced by the goings on. The events are merely commented up by the Camera as hard facts, not as magic, poetry or retribution.

Lopez Neri hinted that ever since then he has been working on a better money-flow, but with Puerto Rican capital, which has been forthcoming before, as we have seen. But this time, maybe, the results will be better. "We know each other in this group, and we are branching off to New York and part of South America," Lopez Neri said.

As for "Arocho y Clemente," similar criticism issues about the camera work. Character development is superficial, and the acting is stage acting. The action is stopped by pregnant silences when meaningful glances are exchanged between the prosecutor and a policeman when they get clues on the crime. Every member in the audience knows what prosecutor and policeman are thinking, so they have to go ahead and say it.

Pavarotti, Freni provoke bravos at U.P.R. concert

By DONALD THOMPSON

STAR Music Critic

Speaking of frenzy, what took place in the University of Puerto Rico Theater on Saturday evening was reminiscent of the delirium which used to attend performances by such figures as Sinatra, Presley, the Beatles, and other idols of the hormone-ridden teeny-belt. The main differences are that here, the frenzied cultists weren't twitchy teenagers but presumably mature folks, and the idols were — of all things — opera singers!

The occasion was a concert of opera excerpts offered by soprano Mirella Freni, tenor Luciano Pavarotti and the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Kurt Herbert Adler and sponsored by the hottest news on the island's concert scene just now, the Pro Arte Musical Society.

There was no attempt to offer any sort of representative or varied selection of opera music, but the best-known sure-fire hits of



LUCIANO PAVAROTTI

the romantic Italian repertory were certainly there. This is what the island's growing subculture of opera lovers seems to crave, and this is what brought Saturday's public to its feet in waves of shiny-eyed, panting humanity.

Pavarotti and Mme. Freni are among today's foremost practitioners of their specialized art, and this performance served to demonstrate their great power over audiences. Mme. Freni's concert presence fits the type of the demure and straightforward heroine, while on the musical side she is a truly extraordinary performer. Every note is clearly heard, and every syllable of text, but always within the context of a musical and dramatic line. Pavarotti, on the other hand, is today's idealized grand opera tenor, which is itself a sort of blend of the romanticized TV lover, the professional athlete, and the wide-eyed youth. Although on Saturday his voice was not in the best condition, all Pavarotti had to do was stride across the broad stage (entering or leaving) to evoke

cries of "bravo!" from all parts of the house.

The Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra performed very well. Even under the best of conditions, playing opera is like walking on eggs, and Saturday's conditions were not of the best. Kurt Herbert Adler has spent over a half-century in and around opera, and there is not a work in the entire standard repertory whose music he does not know inside out. However, and strangely enough, he is not the sort of conductor whose coordinative powers can really help an orchestra over the innumerable tricky places which lurk in opera music. For this reason, a great deal of the concert's success was due to the orchestra's own heightened powers of perception and concentration.

With this event the venerable Pro Arte Musical Society, recently revived after years of silence, maintains its high batting average. May its recent successes be only the first of a long and unbroken line, as it reclaims its place in the island's musical life.