

MAESTRA: The March of the Pencils

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By Jane Franklin

“Maestra” is a celebration of the joy of teaching and learning despite all obstacles. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959 opened the way for putting into practice the Revolution’s goals, the reasons for having a revolution in the first place. One aim was to educate everybody, including all those people who never before had a chance to read or even to write their names.

After two years of revolutionary practice, Cubans were ready to take education to everybody who had been left out by colonialism and dictatorship. On January 1, 1961, Cuba launched its National Literacy Campaign, which became a historical success and a model for other nations. What a revolution it was! About a million people mobilized to eliminate illiteracy in one year: more than 250,000 literacy workers and 707,000 adults who learned to read and write. More than 100,000 of these teachers were not yet 18 years old, and they are the center of this exciting documentary, directed and produced by Catherine Murphy.

“Maestra” focuses on nine Literacy Teachers who tell us not only of how they taught but of how they learned – the lasting effect on their own lives of taking part in a movement that brought joy not only to their students but to themselves and to everybody else in Cuba – except counterrevolutionaries. Describing a transformational experience, Maestra Norma Guillard says, “I began to fall in love with that feeling of independence.”

The Literacy Teachers’ stories are seamlessly intertwined with archival footage and photographs of them in action. Some of them taught in urban areas. Maestra Griselda Aguilera was only seven years old when she asked to join the Literacy Campaign. Obviously too young to be sent to the countryside, she was assigned to teach a 58-year-old man who lived near her home. We get to see the two of them side by side as he learns to read. She says there was no difference between them, no condescension – “there was a lot of trust.”

Most teachers moved into the countryside where illiteracy was widespread. They were youths of mainly junior-high age, leaving home for the first time. First of all, they had to have the courage to want to participate in such an adventure. As Maestra Diana Balboa tells us, many parents were reluctant to have their children “join an army of who really knew what” but the students prevailed and “there we went.”

Maestra Daisy Veitia recalls a 15-day training session that taught them not only about how to teach but how to be “like the family doctors are today, helping to create healthy habits, life habits.” Standard equipment included a uniform, blanket, hammock, two

textbooks, pencils, and a lantern for light to teach by night.

They lived in the homes of the people who were their students – and also their teachers. “Maestra” shows the exchange that occurred as the young teachers immersed themselves in a culture that was different from urban life, sometimes without electricity or running water. As former student Carlos López remembers, the Literacy Teachers worked in the fields and in the homes so they “became like a family working together.”

“Maestra” presents the fruits of their labor. We see a man, perhaps thirty years old, intensely writing his name, Pablo Benítez, on a blackboard and then turning to beam at the camera that was recording his joy at knowing how to write his name instead of having to use an X or a fingerprint.

Their lives were not all work and no play. As we watch archival footage of singing and dancing, Maestra Ivonne Santana tells us, “In the evenings they had parties and we danced... We had fun. We had a good time.”

But this is not a pastoral tale. In April, in the midst of the Literacy Campaign, came the Bay of Pigs invasion. Daisy Veitia remembers how relatives arrived to take her home, but she told them she would stay even if everybody else left.

The invasion was defeated within 72 hours, but the danger for Literacy Teachers continued. Counterrevolutionaries had already killed at least two young teachers, Conrado Benítez and Pedro Morejón, and in the coming months more would be assassinated – Delfin Sen Cedré and Manuel Ascunce Domenech along with Ascunce’s student, Pedro Lantigua. Literacy Teachers were advised to stay inside at night. Maestra Adria Santana recalls how one night there was banging on the door and shouts of “Bring out the literacy teachers, bring out the literacy teachers.” The farmer in the house told them “I’m not scared of any of you.” Diana Balboa says the assassinations made her even more determined “because it was a very beautiful thing that we were doing.”

At the end of the Literacy Campaign in December with their mission accomplished, tens of thousands of Literacy Teachers arrived in Havana. We see marvelous archival footage of them marching to Revolution Plaza carrying huge pencils, symbols of learning, raised like flags above them. Recalling that day, Norma Guillard says, “It was an enormously powerful event because there were so many of us, women and men Literacy Teachers, all very young. I carry that memory.”

“Maestra” carries us close to the heart of the Cuban Revolution.

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