

BEFORE NIGHT FALLS

VENICE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Painter and sculptor Julian Schnabel's glorious but flawed second film, a bio-pic based on the late Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas's 1993 autobiography, might just walk off with the Golden Lion come Saturday, against considerable odds. Such is the word on the Lido, where the 57th International Venice Film Festival is nearing its end amid fevered speculation over whether the larger-than-life Schnabel will emerge victorious for the beautifully photographed and acted "Before Night Falls," a measurable improvement over the self-indulgent ego overdrive that was his first film, "Basquiat."

From the opening moments of "Before Night Falls" -- as the huge, stark, vainglorious words A FILM BY JULIAN SCHNABEL explode across the screen -- it seems certain that the director will once again supercede his own subject matter and emerge as the star of his over-bloated film. But what makes "Before Night Falls" the most unexpected surprise of the fest so far is the reverence and beauty with which Schnabel treats Arenas's restlessness, even when the director threatens to gloss over the more persecutory aspects of his subject's life. The film should at the very least win Arenas the vast following he was denied under Castro, which is reason enough to celebrate Schnabel's sensuous sophomore effort.

Born in 1943 in rural Cuba to an absent father and an indifferent mother who later abandoned him, Reinaldo Arenas joined the anti-Castro revolution in his early teens and relocated to Havana where he worked as a librarian and published his first novel at age twenty -- the only novel he ever published in his own country. Subsequent works were either smuggled out of Cuba and published abroad, confiscated or destroyed by the Castro regime, or else published after Arenas's AIDS death in 1990. Persecuted for both his homosexuality and his brash criticism of the revolutionary government, Arenas was imprisoned in 1973 on morals charges and languished there for two years, writing letters to the wives and lovers of other inmates and smuggling out one completed novel in the rectum of a drag queen called Bon Bon.

Leave it to Schnabel to cast Johnny Depp in this tiny Genet-like role, one of two cartoonish cameos that feel out of place in an otherwise subdued and elegant film. Sean Penn pops up early on as an anti-Castro rebel called Cuco Sanchez, but it's mercifully brief and probably should have been scrapped altogether. It all takes away from Javier Bardem's breakout central performance as Arenas that lends

"Before Night Falls" its riveting drive. The role should earn accolades for the young Spanish heartthrob not just on the Lido, but around the world. Even above Schnabel, Bardem emerges as the film's triumphant saving grace.

As he did in "Basquiat," Schnabel lends an artist's eye to several unforgettable scenes, painting obligatory glimpses of Havana street life in the sixties that should enchant "Buena Vista Social Club" devotees and grant considerable international clout to the recent Fine Line acquisition.

The film's most rapturous moment arrives during an all-night party sequence in which Arenas and his rebel roomies guzzle wine and dance on tables as they prepare to escape Havana the next morning in a hot-air balloon. It's Fellini-esque, right down to the dwarf, and it's the perfect example of how "Before Night Falls" often stumbles over its own lush exoticism, glossing over the incessant persecution by the Castro regime that virtually defined Arenas's life.

As his autobiography reveals, Arenas's obsession with absolute freedom resulted in an avowed 5,000 sexual encounters by the year 1968. From Schnabel's conservative depiction, the writer merely got diddled here and there. Determined to elevate Arenas to the level of martyr and saint (something you'd expect from the art world goliath), the director fails to delve to the heart of what Reinaldo Arenas was all about. He possessed a voracious appetite (sexual, political and otherwise) in a restrictive country that could not contain him -- and so it literally spat him out. In this spirited but one-dimensional depiction, Arenas's unapologetic homosexuality emerges as just one of many personal facets Schnabel chooses to de-emphasize in the name of artsy fartsy aesthetics. He overlooks the big picture in favor of a panorama of pretty little ones that don't so much as define a life as translate it onto a canvas. Alas, Schnabel's camera remains his paintbrush.

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