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Andrew Lang says the reason he was able to make *Sons of Cuba* relatively free of official interference was that his crew was made up of Cubans, contacts he had made while attending film school in Havana.Courtesy Andrew Lang

On and off the ropes

The Sons of Cuba director Andrew Lang tells Ed Stocker why boxing makes the perfect vehicle for telling the story of Havana youngsters fighting both literally and metaphorically for their foothold on the future

Lunchtime in London’s East End and hordes of workers are pouring into the Bethnal Green café where I’m seated. Opposite me, the 29-year-old British director Andrew Lang, fresh faced and sporting a few days’ stubble, is discussing his debut film about child boxers in Cuba while the sun does its best to break through the fluffy clouds above. As we chat, the subject shifts to other filmmakers who have been inspired by Cuba, and Oliver Stone in particular, who has documented Fidel Castro. “I know Cuba well,” says Lang, “and I know when Stone is being misled [by propaganda]. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t seem to be interested in the actual people living in the country – just celebrity leaders.”

If there’s one thing that Lang’s *Sons of Cuba* is not interested in, it’s celebrity leaders. Rather than interviewing party officials or left-wing, Europe-based intellectuals, this is a film that chooses to focus squarely on the everyday people of Havana. In fact, one gets the sense that the director strove to avoid the tired clichés normally associated with the island, which means there is not a vintage car or Che Guevara mural in sight.

Sons of Cuba focuses on the children living and training at the state-run Havana Boxing Academy. The 11-year-olds are chasing the dream of becoming future world and Olympic champions. And it’s by no means a distant prize: Cuba has dominated the sport for the past 40 years, openly championed by Castro as a way to glorify the revolution through sporting prowess. As the film opens with the children training at 4am, spurred on by their coach and chanting slogans like

“Victory is a duty! Defeat cannot be justified!”, it soon becomes apparent that *Sons of Cuba*, more than simply a boxing documentary, is a great prism through which to view contemporary Cuba and its relationship with socialism.

Lang studied Spanish at Edinburgh University where he developed an interest in New Latin American Cinema, writing his thesis on the *Battle of Chile* trilogy by the director Patricio Guzmán, films that charted the downfall of Salvador Allende’s left-wing government and the violent Pinochet coup of 1973. After university, he decided to go to Cuba and study a documentary filmmaking course at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in San Antonio de los Baños, just outside Havana. The building was run-down and the equipment basic, but it was a great learning curve and he was taught by some of Latin America’s greatest directors, including the Argentine Fernando Birri, who runs the school.

While the idea for the film was developed in Cuba, Lang was initially inspired by a report he’d seen in the UK. “I’d read an article in *The Times* about why Cubans are so good at boxing,” he explains. “And I remember the quote from Mario Kindelán, a double Olympic Cuban champion, who was asked why this was. And he said: ‘Cuba is a small country but we live to fight. We fight in all walks of life’. It made me realise that boxing was the perfect metaphor for understanding Cuba. They have a saying in Cuba: ‘How are you? *En la lucha* [I’m fighting/struggling]’, so that fighting mentality is quite pervasive.”

Lang had his own struggle trying

The boxers were so disciplined, and then someone would call someone a name or push someone over and they’d start crying like the kids that they are

to get the film made, originally filming a 10-minute short back in 2006 that he hoped would get him into the National Film and Television School in the UK. When that never materialised, he decided to make a feature-length documentary and went about chasing editors and commissioners for a much-needed cash injection. But it wasn’t easy, he laughs, calling it “a small miracle” that he received the funding. “When you don’t know editors,” he continues, “they don’t even reply. You send off DVDs and they just fall into the void.”

Persistence, however, meant an eventual head-to-head meeting with a top honcho at the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). “He said he’d been looking for a film for Cuba for years,” Lang explains picking up the narrative. “And then he said ‘Can you send me some stuff you’ve done before?’. I panicked, saying ‘I’ve never actually done anything before’ and he just said ‘Well if you’ve never done anything, you’ve never done anything’. After a month or so he gave me \$150,000 and helped bring in other channels to fund the remaining 100.” A 45-minute US version aired on PBS in 2007 before a feature length UK version was self-released in cinemas last year.

One of the remarkable aspects about the *Sons of Cuba* film is the candid responses from the children and the seemingly easy access to the boxing school. In a country that fiercely guards its world image and can be described at best as paranoid, it seemed remarkable that Lang and his crew had such a carte blanche to wander around. Foreign film crews who have worked in

Cuba have often found it hard to get below the surface of the island, and while Lang was out there, a non-Cuban crew was thrown out of the country in the middle of making a documentary about a ballet school in the capital.

The secret for Lang was the contacts he’d made at film school. “All my crew were Cuban,” he says. “There weren’t any foreigners. We realised pretty early on that the access element was so sensitive that the safest, cleanest way was not to have any foreigners on set. I got residency in Cuba, too. That meant that when people came asking what we were doing, it felt like a Cuban production rather than a foreign one.” Lang is quick to praise his local fixers and producers who took great risks, talking the authorities out of having a permanent minder follow the filming.

The children, though, did not immediately open up to the film crew, and the best interview footage of the main characters – the boxers Santos, Junior and Cristian – was on Lang’s third and final visit, when they’d really gelled with the children and had got to know their parents. In many ways the children were too focused on winning the national championships – one of the main threads of the film – and it is fascinating and disturbing in equal measure to see how determined and driven these children are.

It is a tough regime and the young boxers appear remarkably mature on camera, in large part because of the adult world in which they operate. Which is what makes the film work so well. But, as Lang explains, there were moments that made him realise just how young they really

were. “That’s one of the fascinating aspects of that world,” he adds. “The boxers were so disciplined, and then someone would call someone a name or push someone over and they’d start crying like the kids that they are.”

For someone with so much attachment to Cuba, having spent months living there over several years, he’s not afraid to talk about the politics of the island. He neither basks in a left-wing utopia – à la Oliver Stone – nor sides with the anti-Castro Miami Cubans who want to open the country up to capitalism. “I think a lot of people in Cuba want change,” he suggests, “but I don’t think many want wholesale American capitalism. But a lot of people are fed up with the way life is.”

Sons of Cuba is not an overtly political film. Lang was certainly lucky to have been in Cuba at key moments in the island’s contemporary history, witnessing Castro step down in 2006, as well as the defections of three boxers to the West the following year. But it is not a film that steers the viewer towards a particular conclusion, and criticism is only ever subtly implied. Yet perhaps the most poignant scene of the film is when we meet Cristian’s father, a former Olympic champion, living in poverty in Havana. It’s a sad fate for such an important athlete and a reflection of how tough life can be in Cuba. Yet if his son is anything to go by, fighting might just prove a path to a better future. *En la lucha* indeed.

● **Sons of Cuba is out now on DVD from Mr Bongo Films: www.mrbongo.com; www.sonsofcuba.com.**