

Hector Babenco, "Spider" Man

by Steve Warren

"I give a shit for the gay community!... Fuck them!"

Hector Babenco is that rare director who displays as much passion in an interview as his actors do on screen. His fuse may be especially short today because travel delays have put additional pressure on his publicity tour for *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

At one point in the four-year process of bringing Manuel Puig's novel to the screen, after Burt Lancaster dropped out of the lead because of his health, Babenco considered using Brazilian actors to cut expenses. Raul Julia offered to learn Portuguese to stay with the project, but then William Hurt came aboard — at Julia's suggestion — and now Babenco speaks English. He has a good vocabulary but pauses occasionally to check his pronunciation, and grammar gives him trouble when he's excited — which is most of the time.

Concepts confuse him more than words. Why do people in the United States insist on differentiating between the artistic and the commercial? Babenco wonders. "I (do) not consider myself arrogant enough to say that I'm being an artist, and I don't consider myself so stupid at the point to say that I don't like money."

The question that prompts his outburst concerns the reason for adding a woman to a cast that, in Puig's stage version of his story, is limited to the two cellmates — Molina, the gay window dresser jailed for child molesting, and Valentin, the non-gay political prisoner.

Babenco works himself up to being offended, then erupts: "You think that I put Sonia Braga because she has a good pair of breasts and everyone's going to go to the theatre to see her tits?... Yes, I wanted to put Sonia Braga because I knew that a lot of jerk-off people were going to see my movie. Exactly for this only reason. You can write. I can sign on the bottom of the page."

A moment later the volatile director calms down and explains that while Molina may envision himself as the heroine of the movies he relates to pass the time in the cell, "The listener has the rights to fill the shape of the female character of the movie any way that he wants, because in reality one is transferring his emotion through the voice — through the speaking — and the other is just being a listener and imagining the movie.... Then it would really make sense, if this man has a real



Raul Julia and William Hurt

love in life that he never had the courage to recognize (Valentin loves the bourgeois Marta rather than his politically correct comrade in "the struggle"), to give to the same actress (both roles)....

"It would be great to have William Hurt play the Spider Woman. That would have been another option that I had in my head...but then I was facing again the problem that the story was having one listener — it was Raul Julia — and that he's also traveling to his fate in the moment that he's listening to the story of the Spider Woman. And for me suddenly it was so clear that the woman would be just the same all the time, I had no doubt about it." And so Sonia Braga, who was the right age, available, Brazilian and had never worked with Babenco, became the three major female characters in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

The next question to piss Babenco off concerns Molina's sexual profile. Would a man attracted to mature *machos* like Valentin be likely to go to prison for "corrupting a minor"? The chicken hawks I know have no interest in "old men," and those who, like Molina, want "real men," wouldn't fool around with children.

"I never met your friends," Babenco snaps.

"I'm sorry, I'm adapting a book.... I don't think in this way. I'm too much open-mind. I can't circumscribe things.... I can't consider a human being who just like(s) boys, because I don't eat only spaghetti — you understand my meaning? — or just Japanese food."

As we try to explain the sexual specialization frequently found in the "gay community," we find that we've struck a nerve. "That is why I give a *shit* for the 'gay community!'" Babenco explodes. "I have a lot of respect for every one individual person, but in terms of 'community' I don't give a penny; sorry. Like I don't give a penny for *any* other community — Jews, liberal, Marxist, leftist, anarchist, gays, lesbians, machos — I don't give a shit. I'm fighting exactly to destroy all these categories in life and I'm showing this in my movies and I'm risking my skin doing this in movies like *Pixote*, in movies like *Kiss of the Spider Woman*."

The "politically correct" crowd jumped on him before the movie was even made, Babenco continues. "I received a letter from the 'gay community' saying that they read my script and demanding a lot of changing in my movie — like the Nazi party would be doing during the repression in Germany in the 30's — calling my movie 'degenerate' because I was

'betraying the gay ideals.' Fuck them!"

Being more specific he adds, "I received a letter from a gay association (in Los Angeles) telling that if William Hurt is being passive in the sexual relation there must be another sequence (of exactly the same length) in which Raul Julia is being passive in the sexual relation.... Very tough letter." He sent copies, he says, to his closes gay friends.

"Listen," he cautions later, "don't interpret my words as against gays. My best friends are gays. I'm just talking against — against the corporation, because everything became a corporation in the Nazi system. The repression is about the gay ghettos...and this is against the meaning of life. Sometimes you need to protect yourself, you need to make your league, your association; but things (have) their own limits."

A gay man Babenco holds in higher regard is Manuel Puig, who he says is "noble...to have the courage to write the books that he's writing. This is the way in which he is talking about himself.... The most exposed character is Puig."

Homosexuality is a fact of life, not an issue in Babenco's films. One of the central group of boys in *Pixote* made Boy George look butch, but he had no problem being accepted by the others. Molina has a low self-image, but he learns to overcome it is the course of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as the two cellmates absorb each other's better qualities and learn to love each other in a way that transcends sexuality.

Babenco believes his attitude reflects that of Brazil, where he's lived for 16 years. "Brazil is a country with almost no sexual repression," he says. "Thank God we didn't have the colonization from the Calvinists, the Protestants; and the Catholic church was very liberal in Brazil. Then this mixing blood from Africa and European — Portuguese — people; we grew up in a very free society."

"No one's scared about what you do when you go home, and no one's scared about what you show in your movies. Never, no one tell me in Brazil, 'Are you making a gay movie?' and I was listening to this question all the time in America. Everyone who was reading the script or the book or I was telling the movie, said, 'This is a gay movie.' No, man, it's not a gay movie.... I said, 'If you believe it's a gay movie it's your problem, not mine. I know

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