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Chosen by Quino

# Cuban artist animates Mafalda and vampires

by Lionel Martin

Havana

JUAN Padrón modestly declines to be labelled as "Cuba's Walt Disney", though his animated cartoon films have won him an international reputation.

His new hour-long film, *Vampires in Havana*, a joint Cuban-West German-Spanish production, was shown last month at a San Francisco film festival. Padrón did not attend; the United States, he said, had denied him a visa.

He termed the US move "very stupid" since such noted US film figures as Jack Lemmon, Gregory Peck and Robert De Niro attended a similar festival in Cuba a few months ago.

Padrón, 40, often works at his drawing board in his small living room, his two children playing nearby.

In an interview at his flat, he spoke about his work, including some of the three full-length animated cartoons and more than 40 short films he has made since becoming a director at Cuba's Film Institute in 1974.

He has been described as "Cuba's Walt Disney" at film festivals and by foreign visitors. But when the label was mentioned in the interview, he objected to it, saying it might make people think he was arrogant.

Most of his works were produced by the institute. His other new work is an animated short, a joint production by the institute and Quino, an Argentine cartoonist whose *Mafalda* comic strip has followers throughout much of the Spanish-speaking world.

Quino chose Padrón to animate his work, believing he was capable of capturing the rhythm and spirit of the *Mafalda* jokes which appeal more to grown-ups than to small children.

Padrón's *Quinoscopio* — the first of eight planned — has already won prizes at film festivals in Portugal, Spain and Cuba.

Typical *Quinoscopio* humour is a two-minute joke featuring a stereotyped white hunter in Africa. A lion attacks and the funny-looking little hunter brings him down.

African bearers carry the dead lion, hanging from two poles, as the hunter trudges behind them.

Suddenly, a supermarket checkout counter appears in the wild, with an African cashier in traditional turban and dress. As the lion is carried past, she grabs its tail, reads a price tag and punches her sophisticated electronic cash register as the hunter reaches into his pocket to pay.

In one episode of Padrón's earlier *Vampire* series, a laughable-looking vampire hides at night behind a wall as his intended victim, obviously drunk, weaves his way down the street. The vampire pounces, and seconds later, staggers off into the night, as drunk as his victim.

In *Vampires in Havana*, Padrón's imagination runs riot.

The story, unfolding in the 1930s, tells of a vampire who came to Cuba from Transylvania.

He invents a drink called Vampisol which allows vampires to live a normal life, even venturing out on a sunny day. His nephew, given a daily ration of Vampisol, is not aware that he is a vampire and grows up as an ordinary Cuban boy.

A gang of Chicago vampires, gangster types out of old Hollywood movies, decides it wants the Vampisol formula. So does a European-Mafia syndicate. They both descend on Havana for a hilarious battle for the prized potion.

Padrón said that when he was in his early 20s, he

studied with Australian artist Harry Reade and with Spanish cartoonist Juan López.

In 1970 he created a comic strip called *Elpidio Baldes* which immediately became as famous as Disney's Mickey Mouse among Cuban children.

A short, rotund Cuban with a moustache and big cigar, Baldes is a fictional colonel who leads a cavalry squadron of the Cuban independence army fighting against Spain in the 1980s. He has been the hero of hundreds of comic strips, 20 animated shorts and two full-length animated films.

The heroes, as might be expected, are the independence fighters while the Spanish colonists are the butt of the jokes. (Reuters)