

Venezuelan filmmakers yell 'Cut!' over funds

The government plans to invest \$18 million in a movie by an American actor and director who is a fan of Hugo Chávez. Venezuelan filmmakers are furious, prompting a harsh reaction from the culture minister.

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CARACAS --

Venezuelan filmmakers are up in arms over the government's investment of \$18 million in Hollywood star Danny Glover's project for a movie about Haitian independence hero Toussaint L'Ouverture.

The actor and director, best known for his role in the *Lethal Weapon* movies, is a vocal supporter of Venezuela's leftist President Hugo Chávez, and has visited the country several times.

But his counterparts here are outraged by the funding, which they say was illegally approved and amounts to as much as they have received from the government over the past five years.

"We can't help thinking that it should be you who brings Hollywood dollars to Venezuela, if you are so fond of our country and its revolutionary process," two associations of local filmmakers wrote in an open letter to Glover.

Culture Minister Francisco Sesto reacted swiftly and harshly. The next day he cut off all contact with the two associations, which between them represent 380 filmmakers, and ordered their representatives ousted from the bodies in charge of judging funding requests, accusing them of being "elitist and exclusive."

The National Association of Motion Picture Authors and the Venezuelan Chamber of Feature Film Producers responded with a statement titled, "Francisco Sesto violates our freedom of expression."

The funding decision, they say, represents a "demoralizing precedent" that teaches young filmmakers that it is better to "curry political favor" than to apply for government support through open competition.

Glover declined to comment on the protests. In reply to an e-mail, a representative said: "Until we have more concrete information to speak of, we have no comment."

The controversy continues, however. The Venezuelan government is already under attack for refusing to renew the broadcasting license of the RCTV television station. Some filmmakers see this as a similar assault on the principle of free speech.

In a statement, Sesto said it was "nonsense to suggest that this takes money away from Venezuelan cinema." He said the money for Glover's project came from an extraordinary credit approved by the legislature, and that the entire amount would be spent in Venezuela.

The investment is expected to be recovered within five years, said Lorena Almarza, director of the government-run *Villa del Cine*, because the Venezuelan government will receive 60 percent of any profits from Glover's movie.

The *Villa del Cine*, inaugurated 12 months ago, is a lavishly funded film studio that carries out government-approved projects outside the normal funding process. Its publicity says that its aim is to promote, through its productions, "the values of freedom, solidarity, justice and peace."

However, Almarza recently told journalists during a tour of a movie set that there would be no investment in ``any production that interferes with [the government's] own filmmaking wishes and plans."

Director Thaelman Urgüelles said there was still hope that the move could be reversed. "We're asking the minister to reconsider," he told The Miami Herald. ``There's been no legal or administrative action to put his decision into effect. . . ."

"What we want is to stop others following in Glover's footsteps," he said. ``For instance, we know that Oliver Stone is on the same trail, looking to get hold of some dollars. Perhaps this will make him think twice."