

# Freedom & Expression

Edel Rodriguez on leaving Cuba as a little boy and launching a successful career as an illustrator

BY JOEL KELLER

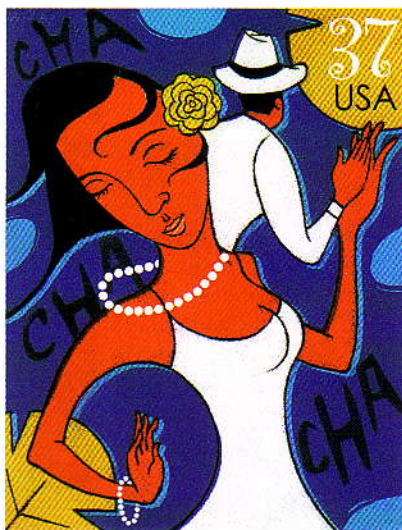
Photos courtesy of Edel Rodriguez

Edel Rodriguez is standing in the kitchen of his Victorian home in historic Mount Tabor sipping an ultra-strong cup of Cuban coffee. Next to him, his wife, Jennifer, is making gingerbread cookies, and his two-year-old daughter, Sofia, is running around, playing with a favorite toy. On this unseasonably warm Monday after Thanksgiving, a decorated Christmas tree is already up in the living room. If Norman Rockwell were alive, he'd probably want to paint the scene for a magazine cover. "I'm happy with everything in my life, the way it's gone," says Rodriguez.

One can understand why the native Cuban seems so content. He's a long way from when he was an eight-year-old refugee on a crowded shrimp boat with 75 others seeking to escape communism through the Straits of Florida. Rodriguez, an award-winning illustrator, has reached the top of his field through a combination of persistence, luck and a lack of self-importance rarely seen in publishing circles. His powerful drawings, mostly pastel and oil-based printing ink on paper, have graced the pages of *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *Billboard* and other top publications. He is also on the other side of the

desk, as an associate art director for *Time* magazine.

While illustrators sweat and toil their whole lives to maybe make it into one of the publications listed above, Rodriguez, 35, simply went



**STAMP OF APPROVAL** Edel Rodriguez's artwork has appeared in magazines, in books, on posters and on this stamp, which was commissioned by the U.S. Postal Service for a series on Latin dances.

where the work was. He always created illustrations that he described as "political and serious" – the first things he remembers drawing as a kid in Cuba are tanks. When he graduated from Pratt Institute with a fine

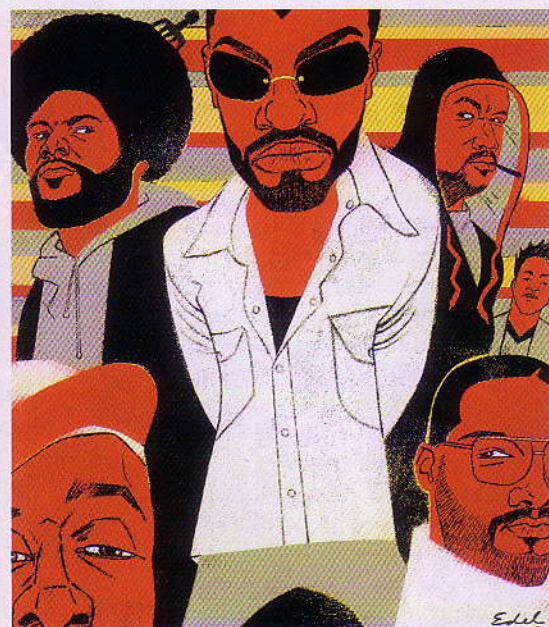
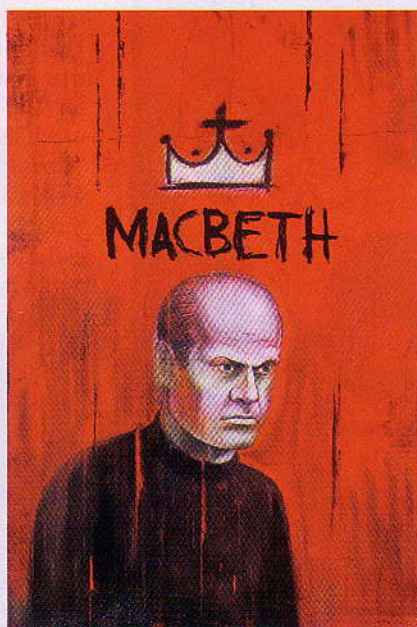
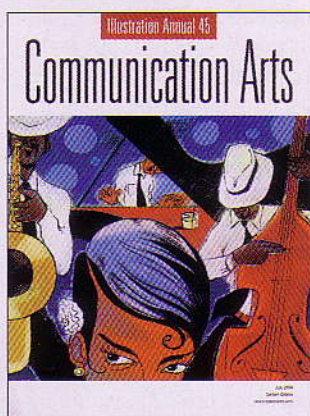
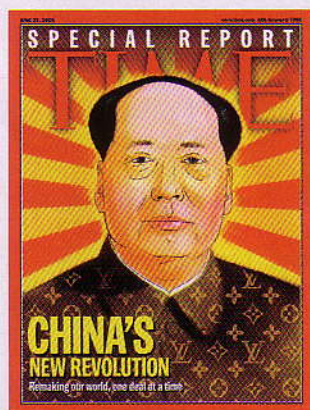
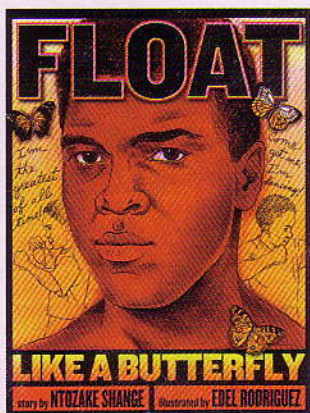
arts degree in 1994, he didn't make a grand plan for how to ingratiate himself with art directors or make a name for himself at cocktail parties. He simply found publications where he thought the black and white drawings he was doing at the time might fit, and dropped off his portfolio.

*The New Yorker* was one of the first ones to bite, and he has published more than a hundred drawings for the magazine since 1995. "It's kind of weird, because I didn't put that much importance into working for *The New Yorker*, at least not as much as I should have," he says. "Now I meet people that see a lot of weight in that, and I never really thought much about it. It was a job and I did it and it was fun, but it didn't really register."

When asked whether he thought he was better off not knowing that those publications were such big deals, he laughs and points at Jennifer, 34, a fellow art director who he met when they were both at Pratt. "Ask my wife," he says; "You could say he's lived his whole life that way," she says affectionately.

Upstairs in his cathedral-ceilinged studio, Rodriguez talks about his time in Cuba without a trace of anger or bitterness. In fact, he remembers his childhood in the countryside town of El Gabriel fondly and with a remarkable vividness. "I think ➤





**HE'S GOT IT COVERED** Counterclockwise from top left: Rodriguez has illustrated books on Muhammad Ali and Celia Cruz; for a *Time* cover story on "China's New Revolution," the artist depicted Mao donning Louis Vuitton; artwork originally created for a calendar on jazz made the cover of the 2004 *Communication Arts* magazine; the poster for a revival of *Macbeth* starring Kelsey Grammer (Rodriguez is pictured in front of the original painting, previous page); and portraits of the rap group The Roots for *Esquire* and filmom's Melvin Van Peebles for *The New Yorker*.





**NOW AND THEN** Left: Rodriguez and his wife, Jennifer, who is also an art director, share their love of drawing with their daughter, Sofia. Right: Standing in the foreground is Edel with his extended family at a party on his grandfather's farm in Cuba.

because [those times] were so different from the U.S., I sort of made the division in my head and just remembered everything," he says. "It seemed like I did something to try and remember these things, because my best friends were there and I left them behind."

But happy memories of playing with his friends aren't the only ones that stuck with him. His father, Cesareo, was a bit of a local entrepreneur, taking on odd jobs like renting out his car to neighbors or doing portrait photography to make extra money. But under Fidel Castro's regime, such resourcefulness was frowned upon, and eventually, Rodriguez says, his family was being watched by neighborhood spies. "Your parents would have conversations with you and say, 'Don't say this at school,'" he recalls. "When we had plans on leaving the country, my mom wanted me to know about it, but there was a big conversation where she said you can't talk about this anywhere."

Around the start of the Mariel boatlift in April 1980, Edel and his older sister Irma were told by his mother, Coralía, that they were going

to leave the island on a boat that was rented by an aunt in Florida. When local military officials got wind of their plans, harassment followed, including rock-throwing and other violence. "And then it was just like, 'Get in the jeep, we're out of here,'" Rodriguez says of their departure. "That was the goodbye to my family and my grandparents."

Following a few days in processing centers and temporary camps, they crowded into the boat with the others. After an overnight journey on calm seas, they arrived safely in Key West.

What Rodriguez has been through could explain why his illustrations, political or cultural, carry a gravity that other commercial illustrations often don't. Whether it's a drawing of a dog with knives for legs to accompany a story on the political situation in Rwanda or a portrait of the late Robert Altman for *The New Yorker*, the bold lines, unconventional angles and bright colors that Rodriguez uses convey an emotional connection between the artist and the subject.

"I don't know how else to do it than putting my feeling and soul into something," he says. "That's what I

think art is. Everybody always wants to know where ideas come from for me, how to treat something...you just sort of feel it right away."

Rodriguez and his wife have lived in Mount Tabor for 10 years, and they are involved in the tight-knit community as members of the Mount Tabor Historical Society. In addition to his magazine work, he has drawn a stamp for the U.S. Postal Service and has illustrated children's books about Muhammad Ali and Celia Cruz, among other topics.

He's gone back to Cuba three times since the boatlift, but not since 2000; since Sofia was born, he's concerned about being stuck down there, either with his family or away from it, in what he currently considers an unstable political situation.

And while Rodriguez loves his native country, he realizes how lucky he is that he doesn't live there anymore. "You sort of see their life and how different it is from mine and what would have happened if my parents hadn't left. That's the biggest thing I live with. And that's why I don't plan that much, because you never know what's going to happen." ■