These 2019 Oscar Nominees Played Characters Living With HIV

Freddie Mercury and Jack Hock died of AIDS-related illnesses. The actors who portrayed them in recent movies are now up for Academy Awards.

January 22, 2019 By Trent Straube

Two actors who portrayed real-life characters living with HIV are nominated for Academy Awards. Rami Malek received a Best Actor nod for playing iconic Queen front man Freddie Mercury in the biopic Bohemian Rhapsody, and Richard E. Grant received a Best Supporting Actor nomination for the role of Jack Hock in Can You Ever Forgive Me?

The 91st Academy Awards will be presented Sunday, February 24. A full list of the nominees is here.

Surely, rock star Freddie Mercury needs no introduction. But if you're unfamiliar with the AIDS angle, read our POZ interview with Somebody to Love author Mark Langthorne "Freddie Mercury Bio Links the Rock Star to AIDS 'Patient Zero.'"

Lesser known is the movie Can You Ever Forgive Me? It's based on the true story of Lee Israel (Melissa McCarthy, who scored a Best Actress nomination), a celebrity biographer who, by the early 1990s, found herself broke and selling stolen and forged letters of literary figures. Her partner in crime was Jack Hock (Richard E. Grant), a fellow New Yorker on the fringes of society—she was an introverted lesbian, and he was a gay former hustler living with HIV.

In interviews with DenOfGeek.com, Grant said that in preparing for the role, he had no photos of the real-life Hock, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1994. Instead, Grant was inspired by actor Ian Charleston (Chariots of Fire), a friend he lost to the disease in 1990. He also drew upon a 1991 visit to actress Sandra Bernhard, who was living in New York City's Meatpacking District, where he encountered people with AIDS begging on the streets.

Am levitating at this astonishing news. Thank you to

@TheAcademy for this nomination in such incredible company. I'm indebted to so many people but most of all @melissamccarthy & Marielle Heller @cyefm ❤@SearchlightUK pic.twitter.com/CIdJSMLkj1

— Richard E. Grant (@RichardEGrant) January 22, 2019

McCarthy lived in New York during that period. "It was a difficult time, certainly the AIDS epidemic was, and people were not rushing out to acknowledge this group or help this group," she tells Den of Geek! "I think both [characters in the film] were people who probably couldn't go back to their families. I think it was just one more kind of element why these two very unlikely people floating, colliding into each other, why it worked."

For a related piece of LGBT history involving the movie, don't miss the Advocate article "The Story of Julius', the Famed Gay Bar in Can You Ever Forgive Me?"

Not everyone is enamored of Bohemian Rhapsody's portrayal of HIV and queerness, particularly its depiction of the early days of epidemic. For just one such viewpoint, read Aja Romano's article on Vox titled "Bohemian Rhapsody loves Freddie Mercury's voice. It fears his queerness." On the brighter side, Variety magazine and LGBT advocacy group GLAAD note the proliferation of queer characters at this year's Oscars.

Oscar Race Most LGBTQ Inclusive in History, GLAAD Says https://t.co/FNjIfY4D57

— Variety (@Variety) January 22, 2019

In related POZ news, see "HIV Gets a Starring Role (and Scores Several Wins) at the Golden Globes" and "AIDS Activists Interrupt the Premiere of 'Bohemian Rhapsody.'"

And speaking of this year's Oscars, here's another article: "Tom Hanks Reflects on 25th Anniversary of AIDS Film 'Philadelphia.'"

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