ER Hath A Way With AIDS

Eight of last season's 25 episodes featured HIV

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Last fall, programmers had high hopes for TV's two new medical dramas, *ER* and *Chicago Hope*. The two shows battled it out and by season's end *ER* triumphed with record-breaking ratings and a spectacular third-place finish for the year. *ER*'s verite style won viewers' hearts with stories that tackled complex medical issues, but the most revolutionary thing about *ER* was that it exposed millions of primetime viewers to AIDS storylines and characters struggling with HIV issues.

Eight of the season's 25 episodes, including one three-show arc, featured AIDS. "We try to deal with HIV in a number of ways. We want to show that the doctors don't make a big deal out of it," says Neal Baer, one of *ER*'s medically trained writers.

Baer, a fourth year Harvard medical student on leave to work for the show, and Dr. Lance Gentile, an emergency physician, screen all dialogue for technical accuracy. Baer, who also writes episodes, relies on his own experiences behind the stethoscope. In the one scene, a man enters the emergency room with his fiancé and a bad case of hiccups. After running tests, the doctor asks to speak to the patient privately, but after declaring that he has no secrets form his fiancée, the couple learns that the hiccups are caused by AIDS related abscesses on the patient's liver. The show, based on several cases that Baer has seen in hospitals, explores the medical and ethical demands that AIDS has made on both doctor and patient without being unbearably PC—after all, it is just TV.

In another episode, titled "Luck of the Draw," Nurse Hathaway (Julianna Margulies) gets stuck by a needle hidden in an IV drug user's sock. After the patient refuses to take an HIV antibody test, the nurse weighs taking the test herself. The doctor tries to allay her fears by running a CD4 count on the drug user. "To be frank, this happens sometimes," Baer says. "It's a way of circumventing the consent issue." On the show, the CD4 count comes back high and Hathaway breathes a sigh of relief. But the writers don't drop the issue there. Hathaway and her fiancé debate whether they should have sex. And, of course, she must take another HIV test in six months. Other episodes followed a teenage prostitute with HIV, an abandoned child with AIDS and a gay man who slips into an AIDS related coma without leaving his partner a durable power of attorney.

ER addicts can expect to see much more about AIDS in the coming season. "HIV is a big fact of life and I expect it will continue to be a big part of the show," says Baer. And what will become of our

beloved Hathaway? Baer says even the writers aren't sure. "The honest truth is that we don't know."
—Erik Ashok Meers

Film
Mort Apres 'Chocolat' killing spree that casts a veil of terror over Paris ended in December 1987, when Thierry Paulin and his lover and accomplice Jean-Thierry Mathurin were arrested and charged with the murders of over twenty elderly women. Paulin, a black drag queen and denizen of Parizian night life, died of AIDS at the age of 26 in April 1989 before he ever came to trial.

Dubbed by the French press "The Little Old Lady Killer," Paulin's story has inspired *I Can't Sleep*, a film by fench director Claire Denis (best known for her hauntingly sensual film *Chocolat*). When I heard about his death, I was struck by Thierry Paulin's journey through life. He had been a character on the fringe of society since his childhood—black, homosexual, with his drug deals, his murders, and then AIDS. The press referred to him as a monster, but the man, the person, remained totally mysterious," says Denis.

Ironically, *I Can't Sleep* can't offer much of an analysis of the criminal pathology of the accused because, according to Denis, there is little information about Paulin available. Instead the film builds a fictional web of people who encounter the Paulin-based character, dubbed Camille, in their 18th arrondissement. Because these characters are unaware of the murderer in their midst, they are cast as the "innocent victims," an unfortunate analogy.

"I asked myself about presenting a negative, insulting image of a black man in my film, and you can say that I applied no notion of correctness," says Denis, "refusing to accept that a homosexual or a black man can be a murderer is another way of saying 'those people are so different from us that we don't have to preserve them from an insulting image.' I don't like it when films offer so-called minorities either token parts or a naïve and guileless justification of the fact that they are human beings in their own right," Denis offers to those potentially offended.
—Cathay Che

Theater
Slow *Boat* to Berkely

Everyone who has entered the land of the Made-for-TV knows the territory. A small boy, gifted and lovable, is diagnosed with hemophilia. Friends and neighbors rally with loving support. Then, through a bum transfusion, AIDS rears its undiscriminating head. Community benevolence reveals its discriminating truth. The boy is tossed out of school, pronto. Lip service compassion reigns. Crocodile smiles abound. People stay away. At the age of eight, the boy dies.

When these events befell young Benjamin Saar in the mid '80s, they were too fresh and incomprehensible for cliché. Ryan White had yet to provide grist for the tragedy-by-numbers TV movie mill. AND, it would be several years before the first red ribbon carried a message of

enlightenment to Benjamin's Arizona home town.

One day in 1993, a play was produced about Benjamin called *The Yellow Boat*, it departed formt he Land of the Made-for-TV in three important respects: It was written by his father, David P. Saar. It was intended to be performed before children by David's Tempe, Arizona-based theater company, Childsplay. And it attempted to capture the experience of grave illness from the youngster's point of view. Unmistakably, this story came from the Land of the Personally Felt.

Two years and 21 drafts later, *The Yellow Boat* is sending ripples far beyond its landlocked port. After productions in Seatle, Calgary, Milwaukee and St. Louis, Saar's loving creation will reach California's Berkeley Rep this fall, along with Los Angeles schools via the Mark Taper Forum.

What these audiences will see is a play that speaks the language of a young boy meeting an alien world, populated with strange hardware, producing physicians and a tireless social worker named Joy. Since the boy is also an artist, the language conveys this gueling experience through colors, Crayola-style. If Benjamin coul have culled his drawings for an exhibiton, he might have called it Journey to the Center of My Guts.

The older Saar, a genial director with an easy laugh, hoped his play would be as much about the transforming power of a remarkable young artist as it was a piece about illness. "Art was so much a part of Benjamin's world. Beyond having people face a disease that so many think is someone else's problem, I wanted to show art as being a par of life, father than just something you hang on the fridge door," he says.

On the subject of the community response to Benjamin's sickness—the ostracism, the two-faced offers of help—Saar's laugh recedes. Asked how he and his wife might have behaved had the HIV shoe been on another child's foot, he says, "It's important to put these incidents within that '80s time frame; there was so much fear that clouded reason." Then after a terse pause, he adds, "I don't think I could do what was done to us."
—Jan Stuart

Film
Dead *Drag* Queens Don't Wear Plaid

In early June, one of the largest lesbian and gay film festivals ever took place in New York City. As you would expect, HIV featured promintely. Early in the festival a British film, *Heaven's a Drag*, played to a near capacity house.

The film tells the story of an HIV positive drag queen and his HIV negative, leather-clad, TV repairman boyfriend. They live in an open relationship. In the apartment above lives their bleached blond, man-eating feline neighbor who meets a pretentious, do-gooder social worker with whom she ultimately settles down.

The drag queen dies of AIDS and comes back as a ghost to haunt his former lover who is the only

person who can see him. This leads to several funny scenes including, one where the former lover's prospective one-night stand is frightened into leaving the apartment before anything can happen. When the ghost appears to his former boyfriend there is a wonderful exchange. "You're supposed to be dead!" the surviving lover says. "Trust you to nit-pick," replies the ghost.

The film, although a comedy, has some poignant moments dealing with unresolved grief and letting go. Even the ghost ultimately realizes that he must move on to the next world to allow his former lover to get on with his life. The ending seems to be influenced by *Angels in America* when a group of angels come to take the drag queen to paradise.

Another film dealing with HIV is the documentary *Black is, Black Ain't* made by Marlon Riggs. The film examines black identity in different contexts and then cuts back to Riggs lying in what proves to be his death bead as he tries to direct the movie.

Riggs doesn't shy away from exposing the hypocrisy among some homophobic blacks who demand the end of racial injustice while discriminating against gays. Sometimes, however, the film feels unfocused and shapeless as it tries to tackle almost too many issues.

Riggs' courage in making the film while plainly so ill, though, is awe-inspiring. Black Is, serves as a memorial to a great African-American artist.
—Paul Harris

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