Hollywood & AIDS

In real life, we witness heroism and horror we have never encountered in the movies. Why isn't that drama up on the screen?

December 1, 1994 By David Ansen

The first man's death that mattered to me happened on-screen in Technicolor. It was William Holden, my favorite star of the 50s, an actor I noticed even then always had a scene where he took his shirt off, revealing a chest several decades before its time. Holden had never died on me before. My 12-year-old lungs choked at the sight of this fallen hero, a titillating grief mixed with a junior aesthete's awe: This must be art if the star dies at the end. The movie was *The Bridges of Toko-Ri*. My video guide tells me it was a powerful film about the futility of the Korean War, but I remember none of this. All I retain is the indelible image of Holden, splayed on his back on the battlefield, and my own confusing, exhilarating sorrow.

Hollywood has taught us all our first lessons in sex and death. Most of the time we didn't even know we were being taught; many of the lessons are unintentional, for Hollywood is as often as not unconscious of the consequences of its images. What Hollywood shows and what it says aren't always the same: What teenager of the '50s remembers *The Wild One* as an attack on motorcycle gangs? No, it was an invitation to worship Brando's black leather cool, and it might be decades before it dawned on you just where that infatuation had taken you. The movies taught us how to fall in love with beautiful people, but they didn't teach us how to live with them and they didn't show us how to mourn them. Death was an exquisite swoon, a roll of Garbo's eyes as she expires tactfully at the end of *Camille*; a swift, orgasmic *danse macabre* as Faye and Warren's bullet-riddled bodies hit the dust in *Bonnie and Clyde*. When the end came it was always dramatically timely.

Nothing, certainly not Hollywood, prepared us for AIDS. We'd never seen the bed pans, the lesions, the dementia, the prematurely hollow eyes of a young, suddenly skeletal friend. The old narratives didn't apply. The old lessons left us unprepared. Where were the images that would sustain us through the crisis, that could give shape to our rage, that could reflect the day-to-day courage of men and women grappling with the reality of HIV? In real life, we witnessed heroism and horror we'd never encountered in the movies. Why wasn't that drama up on the screen?

It's not news that of all the arts Hollywood has been the most sluggish to respond to AIDS, the most fearful. In the theater, in dance, in the art world, the creative response to the crisis was quick and passionate. It was not an option not to respond. Yet it was to Hollywood, the patriarch of our

dreams, that we turned our greatest hopes. There was a war on, a war for consciousness fought with images, and the most powerful arsenal was in Hollywood's hands. As its children, we craved the legitimacy of its attention.

It may be foolish to rest so much hope on an institution that has always preferred escapism to reality, but Hollywood's evasion creates a hole in the culture. What does this abnegation of experience say about an industry that has itself been devastated by the loss, but can't find a voice -- an on-screen voice -- to address the crisis? The justification for years of silence in Hollywood is no different from the justifications of Washington: We're just heeding the voters, who tell us what they want to see. It's the politics of the pocketbook.

Philadelphia put the lie to that, though there's no predicting the lesion Hollywood will glean from its success -- perhaps nothing more than that Tom Hanks is a very bankable star. *Philadelphia* was a homophobia primer, a valiant first step deliberately designed to reach an uninitiated audience. One doesn't expect, or want, the studios to crank out a dozen socially conscious *Philadelphia*s a year. We've never loved Hollywood for its lectures, and it rarely delivers them artfully. Nor is it reason to be grateful when filmmakers merely thumb a ride on the zeitgeist: When Tom Hanks' beautiful girlfriend dies of an unnamed virus at the end of *Forrest Gump*, AIDS becomes no more than a sentimental plot device, a fashionable *frisson*.

Can't we go deeper? AIDS has changed the way a generation of artists has looked at the world, it's forced us all to look at our mortality, our sexuality, our values, in a piercing new light. It's that grimly won opportunity to see the world afresh that has invigorated the theater, the dance world, that's created art that couldn't be visualized before. If Hollywood refuses to listen to these new, urgent voices it runs the risk of consigning itself to irrelevancy. AIDS is not, as the moneymen in Hollywood seem to think, a single unhappy story. It's thousands of stories, tragic and comic, joyful and bitter, mundane and mysterious. It's life as we live it now, under the shadow, and if movies want to be anything more than reflections of themselves, if they want to again lay claim to our souls, Hollywood has only to open its eyes.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Hollywood-AIDS-16654-4371