Hollywood Shuffles AIDS

Tinsel Town's script about AIDS is good, but the picture's not always pretty

January 1, 1996 By Richard Natale

This past fall marked the 10th anniversary of Rock Hudson's death from AIDS and the true beginning of Hollywood's AIDS activism. It is a milestone of sorts for the entertainment community and an appropriate moment to pause and measure what has been accomplished, as well as what still needs to be done.

On the plus side is the tireless work performed by certain industry leaders: From the more visible like Elizabeth Taylor and Judith Light, to the no-less-dogged efforts of behind-the-scenes leaders such as Sidney Sheinberg, David Geffen, Steve Tisch and Barry Diller.

The AIDS organizational infrastructure in Los Angeles, while not without its growing pains or down periods, now spans an impressive range of essential services. They range from the broader-based organizations such as AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) and the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center to the more specific Project Angel Food, Shanti, Hollywood Supports, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, Aid for AIDS, to the even more narrowly targeted services like PAWS (pet care for PWAs) and Aunt Bee's (laundry).

Hollywood's support has been crucial to the survival of these organizations, not only via the hundreds of star-studded fundraisers but literally as the conscience of many of these organizations. So much so that the rest of Los Angeles seems to be lagging seriously behind.

"There's been internal criticism that we don't do enough to reach the downtown and business community, that we concentrate too much on the entertainment business," says Dana Miller, executive director of APLA. "That's bunk. The industry has been the hardest hit, and from day one, they're the ones who've been writing the checks. I'm proud to say that 80 percent of our funding comes primarily from people in the entertainment industry."

All this energy and effort has been played against a background of devastating loss. A roll call of talent that has succumbed to the epidemic cuts a wide swath across the industry. The resulting grief has served both to galvanize and obstruct the continuing efforts to keep Hollywood focused on AIDS.

It has helped, because with each passing year, more and more people in the industry are personally affected by HIV. That's one of the reasons that this year's AIDS Walk in September was

APLA's most successful ever, raising $3.2 million, according to *Forrest Gump* producer Steve Tisch, former board chair for the organization.

But it has also manifested itself in bouts of extreme burnout. "There's only so much mourning you can do," says Neil Tadken, founder and coordinating director of Day of Compassion, the organization which encourages daytime TV shows to include AIDS in their storylines or segments one day in June each year. "Then you go away for a while, refocus and come back."

Another facet of the burnout has less to do with Hollywood than a general sense of pessimism because the prayed-for magic bullet for AIDS has not materialized. "It's the American way of wanting something cleared up quickly," says openly gay *Frasier* actor Dan Butler. "It's been 15 years since the epidemic began and people don't want to be reminded it's still there."

Disappointment over an elusive cure, however, has obscured significant inroads that have been made in HIV treatment, says Richard Jennings, executive director of Hollywood Supports, the entertainment industry's activist conscience on AIDS and lesbian and gay issues. And part of the blame for that falls on the industry itself. As one of the nation's two major media capitals, Hollywood has a responsibility to inform the public of the many fronts on which the battle against AIDS is being successfully waged -- but too often does not.

"There are treatments that are helping people live demonstrably longer," says Jennings. "We have many more long-term survivors and non-progressors volunteering with us all the time. But the media just reports a discouraging blurb from the International AIDS Conference and think that's indicative of the real state of things."

While all these reactions are understandable, says openly gay DreamWorks principal David Geffen, they fly in the face of an epidemic that shows no signs of peaking. "I know some people are burned out," says Geffen, who in August donated $4 million to Gay Men's Health Crisis and God's Love We Deliver (the largest-ever single gift for AIDS services). "But I don't know that burnout is permissible. It's precisely burnout that leads to things like unsafe sex. And therein lies a great tragedy."

According to Tisch, however, the burnout factor has abated somewhat. "[APLA] experienced a downward trend [in fundraising] over the past two years, which obviously made us nervous. There was a natural cycle of 'we've had enough and we're on to other issues,' especially in the Hollywood community."

But John Gile, executive director of Project Angel Food, which delivers hot meals to Los Angeles PWAs and opened a new kitchen in October, 1994, says it has leveled off in 1995, in part because "the old guard has been joined by a younger group of volunteers, some openly HIV positive."

The mid-term elections and the conservative swing in the country have also helped Hollywood AIDS leaders remarshal their forces. "We've been renewed since the November elections," says actor Judith Light, an indefatigable AIDS activist. "It stepped up people's consciousness. Since then there's been a refocusing in Hollywood. And Hollywood often leads the way for the rest of

America.”

The conservative swing, however, has made the media more gun-shy about controversy, according to KNBC entertainment reporter Garrett Glaser, especially subjects like AIDS and safer sex.

But overall, AIDS activism in Hollywood is no longer a fledgling movement, and -- hand-in-hand with lesbian and gay activism -- has moved on to a more mature phase. After Hollywood Supports co-founder Sidney Sheinberg added sexual orientation to the antidiscrimination policy and extended health benefits to the domestic partners of lesbian and gay employees at MCA/Universal, the studio he headed, the floodgates seemed to open. Many of the major studios, networks, unions and production companies followed suit. At present every major studio except MGM/United Artists and 20th Century Fox provides domestic partner benefits. And, Jennings adds, “MGM is on the verge.” Legal recognition has visibly improved the lives of gays and lesbians in the industry, especially those with HIV.

Christopher Laabs, assistant director for script clearance at Sony Pictures, has known he’s HIV positive for 11 years and has found his work environment “very supportive.” Since the studio extended benefits to gay and lesbian employees’ domestic partners, he says, two of the three gay employees who applied have HIV positive partners. “It hasn’t been a problem. Our human resources department has some of the best benefits in the industry,” he says.

Steve Smith, former editorial director at KNX Newsradio, was out as an HIV positive gay man at work for several years before going on disability in late 1994. “I told people at work as early as 1988,” says Smith. Officially he received a great deal of support. In fact, when his initial claim for disability was denied, CBS (which owns KNX) intervened and the decision was overturned.

The reaction of co-workers, however, “was all over the map,” he says. “Some were cool, some awkward and others uncomfortable.” He found it particularly interesting that journalists who report on the AIDS epidemic displayed the same discomfort as employees of any other industry.

Being in an executive position afforded Smith the opportunity to be an educator over the past seven years. “At the margins, I think I made a difference both in the way AIDS is covered by KNX and how the company became involved on a corporate level.”

And even when he went on disability, he continued to broaden his colleagues’ perspective by explaining that “just because I couldn’t work 9 to 5 anymore didn’t mean I was going to die soon. Instead, it was that I was taking care of myself and putting my health issues first. There was a great sense of closure when I left. I wasn’t slinking away into the night with a big, dark secret.”

Unfortunately, on the more visible level, even though several working actors have come out as HIV positive in the past several years -- Michael Kearns, Lee Mathis, Keith Christopher -- none who are household names have done so. The legacy of actor Brad Davis’ sad, posthumous disclosure remains. And Davis’ fear of never being cast again -- or of being typecast -- if he revealed his HIV status has proven in some ways to have been well-founded. “Why do HIV positive actors have to

play HIV positive characters?" asks KNBC reporter Glaser. "Is it just so the show can trot him out for the press as a way of meeting diversity guidelines?"

Michael Kearns, one of the TV and film industry's first actors to publicly announce his status, has played several such roles. But he says, "My days in a wheelchair on TV are over." He thanks those who hired him to play those roles, even if they only did it because it was hip. But if Hollywood has truly made it safer for gays and lesbians to come out or reveal their HIV status, he asks, "why can we cite so many people who remain in the closet?"

The answer seems obvious, but it goes to the heart of Hollywood's more ingrained attitudes towards homosexuality and AIDS. Progress in the areas of civil rights and empathy have not erased persistent opinions about gays and the epidemic.

"Strides toward the cure for AIDS are directly proportional to the degree of homophobia that exists," says Kearns. One of his targets is agents and managers, who while wearing red ribbons in public, encourage their HIV positive, lesbian or gay actor clients to remain hidden. "Their actions belie what Hollywood is saying."

Butler concurs. "Being out and visible is interlinked to fighting AIDS." Since he officially came out last year when his one-man show *The Only Thing Worse You Could Have Told Me...* debuted in Los Angeles, he has continued to play a rabidly heterosexual chraracter on *Frasier*. "The real difference has been in how I feel about myself," he says. "I have more energy to put elsewhere. If that helps other people, I'm grateful."

And while Hollywood pats itself on the back for *Philadelphia*, the fact remains that, in 15 years, it has been the only major studio film about AIDS. Two more, *Boys On the Side* and *The Cure*, floundered at the box office. The fourth, *It's My Party*, was independently financed but will be released early next year by MGM/United Artists.

The drama, which stars Eric Roberts, Gregory Harrison, Margaret Cho and Olivia Newton-John among others, has taken director/writer Randal Kleiser (*Grease, The Blue Lagoon, Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*) three years to get made, despite its bare-bones $3 million budget (only $1 million more than the independently produced and released groundbreaker *Longtime Companion*). No studio would touch *Party*, even with a bevy of stars (all working for scale) attached and with a soundtrack donated by songwriters and performers. But, sighs Kleiser philosophically, "there haven't been many movies about cancer either. The premise [of *Party*] sounds like a downer and Hollywood is in business to entertain."

Screenwriter Ramsey Fadiman is currently waiting for the green light on the long-in-gestation *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's 1985 AIDS play for which he's written several drafts over the past two years. To date, two other projects with AIDS themes on which he's worked have never reached the screen, he says. Unfortunately, this has less to do with "the quality of the script than with the elements: Who's producing, who's starring, etc. All I can say is that Barbra [Streisand] has committed to getting this film made, and I believe she will do that."

But first Streisand will film *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, which went into production this fall. The earliest start date on *Normal* is mid-1996.

At Hollywood Supports, Richard Jennings is sent most of the AIDS scripts in development and says there's been no significant increase in their number, though there has been a more dramatic rise in the number of projects which deal with gay issues. "They've gone from zero to 60 in the past couple of years."

Adam Shulman, literary agent for Agency for the Performing Arts, says, "there's a real gay chic happening. Studios and financing entities are interested in gay projects -- but outside the AIDS arena. In terms of HIV-related projects, even with independents it's a hard sell. Executives and financiers don't believe people will buy tickets to an AIDS movie. It's sad that that's true because there are some great stories concerning HIV that should be told."

Even within the narrower scope of gay independent cinema, at this year's Outfest in Los Angeles most films did not deal with the issue of AIDS. "People are tired of dealing with AIDS," says Out on Screen's executive director Morgan Rumpf, "and the films reflect that." Or perhaps, he suggests, filmmakers may be in transition, moving into a another phase. "Maybe we're on the cusp of new kinds of films that deal with AIDS, not as an issue but as a continuing part of our lives."

Changes in Hollywood's attitudes toward gays and lesbians in general, and HIV in particular, are likely to continue to require patience and perseverence.

Events such as June's Day of Compassion and World AIDS Day provide the industry with platforms around which to build original programming and public service announcements to focus on HIV. Neil Tadken, who founded the Day of Compassion, made a quantum leap this year with the backing of Hollywood Supports.

In its first two years, Day of Compassion was limited largely to daytime soaps and talk shows. This year more than 45 cable networks participated, says Molly Padian, executive director of Cable Positive, that industry's AIDS organization. The cable industry's commitment has broadened, which led to Padian being brought on this year in a full-time position to better "match the cable industry's resources to groups that need their help."

A crying need for more effective education is perhaps the most repeated demand made of the entertainment industry by members of LA's AIDS activist community. With AIDS spreading rapidly among African-Americans, Latinos, teens and women, as well as with the younger gay population, there is a sense of discouragement about how effective the HIV prevention messages have been so far.

Through his volunteer work, Sony's Christopher Laabs has found that the hardest areas in the entertainment industry to crack have been the rank and file -- particularly film and TV crews. For instance, as a facilitator Laabs has encountered problems with wardrobe personnel who are afraid of being infected through safety pins or straight pins. "They don't know that HIV doesn't work that way. Non-hollow needles can't spread the virus."

One solution would be for industry leaders to take an hour out of the production day to reach these neglected pockets -- with mandatory attendance. “It would be more cost-effective in the long run,” Laabs says, “Because it’s precisely the people who resist these meetings the most who wind up asking the most questions.”

Some have even come out as HIV positive in the seminars, but Laabs estimates that there are still six times as many people in the industry who are infected than will admit to it -- or may even be aware. Far too many new AIDS cases are still detected only after the onset of a major opportunistic infection, he says.

Beyond that, Hollywood Supports’ Jennings would like to see the institution of friends and family seminars in the industry to spread the worth farther into the general L.A. population.

After a brief flurry of condom ads on TV last year, they’ve suddenly vanished. Jennings says this reflects the conservative swing after the November election. The Centers for Disesase Control and Prevention (CDC), which had cajoled the networks into carrying spots, has recently backed off.

An alternative means of getting condom ads back on the air would be through consumer activism, Jennings suggests, by approaching the condom companies and urging them to advertise. “Condom companies could be putting more ad dollars into TV advertising. Fox Broadcasting, for instance, is supposedly open to showing them. I think they would see results, both in awareness and in sales.”

The more immediate battle is in the everpresent need to raise funds for AIDS organizations. If a cure for AIDS were found today, says APLA’s Miller, his organization would still need to keep its doors open another 20 years, serving the needs of people who are already infected.

Today APLA is a $22 million corporation serving 5,300 men and women -- adding 7 new clients each day -- the largest AIDS organization west of the Mississippi. “It’s not cool being No. 1,” says Miller. “We’re always thinking of new ways to make more money because if we make the same as last year we have to cut our client load. That’s part of the growing pains of a corporation and an epidemic.”

Their attempts at streamlining services by not duplicating those available elsewhere (food delivery, legal assistance, etc.) only goes so far toward saving money. The problems of constantly returning to the same well of supporters has been complicated by the fact that other causes -- breast cancer, for instance -- have adopted the rhetoric and style of AIDS fundraising. Another problem is that the larger AIDS organizations are more organized, but the smaller, yet equally important, groups operate on a narrower margin.

“It’s harder to give more to AIDS charities,” admits literary agent Shulman. “Some people aren’t even aware of worth-while organizations such as Shanti, Aid for AIDS and Project Angel Food.”

That reality doesn’t cow David Geffen. “The fact that we have to go back to the same people and they’re tired of hearing from us, whether it be for AIDS or for Democratic candidates, well, it’s just too bad.”

For all the encouraging news about renewed vigor in the AIDS fundraising community, however, there is little ease or comfort about the year ahead. In particular, the current political climate is not propitious, and Steve Tisch doesn't expect it to get better.

"The Republicans have made AIDS an issue, not because they're interested in doing anything about it, but because it scores votes," Tisch says. "It's likely to be a big issue in the 1996 campaign -- as a negative, not as a positive."

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