How They Shot AIDS: A Viral Video Roundup & Takedown

At 20, the epidemic is a Hollywood has-been. Greg Villepique reruns AIDS' tearjerkers and not-so-moving pictures -- from And the Band Played On to Zero Patience -- to find a few pearls in the popcorn.

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How do you make a movie about AIDS without trivializing the epidemic or turning its victims into plaster saints? The short answer is, you make a documentary -- *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993), for one, bears harrowing witness to life and death in AIDS country. But check out your video store's feature films that deal with AIDS. Even if we're charitable -- and why should we be? -- it's fair to say that most suck. Luckily, it's also fair to say that there are a few terrific exceptions.

Two howling misconceptions have hobbled filmmakers from the start: First, they're so squeamish about how audiences will react to HIVers onscreen that they give us not flesh-and-blood people, musculums and all, but "heroes" with all the depth of sock puppets -- usually an ultra-"normal," well-heeled, humorless white guy who is nominally gay but cinematically sexless. Second, they railroad us with cheap sentimentality: Rather than persuading us to care about how that character under the ever-graying Max Factor actually feels, they focus on the aren't-we-brave survivors, making us feel as if we're brave, too, so let's all have a feel-good cry -- a shallow response associated more with black-velvet paintings of big-eyed waifs than with serious art.

Ironically, the very first movie about AIDS to hit theaters, the placid little indie *Parting Glances* (1986), featured one of the most realistic PWAs. The leather-jacketed, knife-tongued Steve Buscemi is angry and anguished, he throws attitude at everyone, but he's honest and likable. Of course, Buscemi is there only as a colorful contrast to the boring HIV negative lead couple. No such foil saves the glacially paced *An Early Frost*, the TV-movie that preceded *Glances* by a year. There's nothing remotely unsavory or prickly about Aidan Quinn's WASP with HIV, and the plot is a mere lecture: "Parents, love your gay children! AIDS is not a moral judgment on sinners! Really!" OK, so America needed that propaganda in 1985, and it probably still does. But here's another problem with AIDS movies: Knee-jerk liberals, including many reviewers, often point out that the masses need the "message," but which movies do these hypocrites themselves rent? Not this after-school-special dreck.

Propaganda was still the priority in 1990, when *Longtime Companion* came out. This one follows a cozy little clique of white-bread gay New Yorkers, from the day in 1981 when *The New York Times*

published its first “gay cancer” story through a decade of night sweats, deathbed vigils and tearful group hugs (see “How to Make an American AIDS Movie,” below). From what we see of the characters’ sex lives, you’d think HIV was transmitted by tainted cocktails at Fire Island house parties. What’s worst, though, is the climactic fantasy sequence in which our dopey gym-bunny survivor imagines what it would be like if AIDS were cured, and sees all his dead friends alive again and dancing on the beach. Sure, it’s heart-wrenching, but hello! The cure won’t bring back the dead.

And now -- drumroll, please -- the award for worst AIDS movie ever. It goes to...*Philadelphia* (1993), which is as soulless, unsubtle and full of plot holes as the cheapest exploitation flick. Tom Hanks plays the king of the sock puppets, a white-(shoe) attorney with HIV who enlists a black ambulance-chaser (Denzel Washington) to win his case against the evil firm that fired him. (I’d rather watch the psycho nelly in director Jonathan Demme’s previous film, *Silence of the Lambs*, any day.) Hanks’ bizarrely unmotivated interpretive dance *cum* IV stand to Maria Callas in front of his homophobic lawyer may have won him an Oscar, but as Larry Kramer snapped in a *Los Angeles Times* Op-Ed, “I’d be afraid of someone too if -- out of the blue -- he behaved like this.” Most critics carefully avoided saying anything really bad about this really bad movie -- again, that condescension to those heathens still in need of that PC sermon. The Bruce Springsteen song that runs under the opening credits packs way more emotional weight than all the movie’s courtroom drama and KS lesions combined.

Standard Hollywood procedure would have seen every producer scrambling to jump on the AIDS bandwagon after *Philly*’s glut of publicity and box-office success, but it didn’t happen. Most of the industry looked at the ridiculous hoops Demme had jumped through only to suck all the logic out of his film, and decided it was too much work. So the subject of white homos with AIDS had been “done.” Twists on the theme were pursued in the haha-huggy *Jeffrey* (1995) and the boohoo-huggy *It’s My Party* (1996). The “changing faces” of AIDS -- “innocent” kids with AIDS (*The Ryan White Story*, 1989), guilty kids with AIDS (*Kids*, 1995) and smack-shooting supermodels with AIDS (*Gia*, 1998) -- were similarly dispatched in one-time swoops.

And what about women with AIDS who aren’t smack-shooting supermodels? In *Boys on the Side* (1995), the asexual homo and the haloed HIVer are split into two characters for maximum compassion points. The first third of the movie is lots of fun, a road comedy with very spiky edges. Once the protagonists (bad girl Drew Barrymore, sassy lesbian Whoopi Goldberg and mousy surprise PWA Mary-Louise Parker) have settled into their communal Shangri-La in the Southwest and the “AIDS wasting” makeup comes out, though, director Herbert Ross clobbers you with an earnest stick. The ensuing wave of weepy sisterly bonding effectively washes away any psychological reality, except the reality that many moviegoers are willing to cry at the lamest provocation.

So are they all tearjerkers? Thankfully, no. In 1992, Gregg Araki made *The Living End*, a cocky, unsentimental gay riff on *Thelma & Louise*. A cute odd couple with HIV meet, fuck and take their virus on the road, with the occasional murder of a homophobe or two. Not that Araki advocates homicide, but he acknowledges nobody-can-save-us rage as a central response to AIDS, not a brief phase on the way to Kübler-Ross transcendence. If *Longtime Companion* is a cinematic equivalent

to the writing of Andrew Holleran, all mournful anxiety, *End* flaunts Dennis Cooper's punk intensity and the hilarious black humor of then-thriving PWA zine *Diseased Pariah News*.

The scene where Luke, the hustler, seduces Jon, the just-diagnosed film geek -- no condoms! -- demolishes the idiotic implication of all the above-mentioned movies that sex is over once you're infected. Araki called *The Living End* "An Irresponsible Movie," which pinpoints a crucial issue: Should filmmakers be required to be press agents for the AIDS cause instead of artists, to depict squeaky-clean Boy Scouts instead of raunchy, rounded characters an audience can believe in? With snotty panache, Araki comes down on the side of art. He leaves his lovers exhausted but still clinging to each other, at least for now, and -- what's more important -- still alive.

In John Greyson's very weird *Zero Patience* (1993), believability is not even in question. Our hero is Sir Richard Burton -- not Liz Taylor's late ex, but the famed Victorian explorer, who, we're told, discovered the fountain of youth and is still alive and working in obscurity in a Toronto museum. He's curating an exhibit for the public on the spread of AIDS. Burton, like tons of people, believes that Patient Zero, the French-Canadian flight attendant, was the great villain of the epidemic.

But wait! Up pops the foxy ghost of Zero himself to teach Burton a thing or two about the way he and others were scapegoated by public-health experts. Oh, yeah, it's a musical -- when Burton looks into a microscope, there's singer and original HIV dissident PWA Michael Callen, in drag, as the HIV virus, in a lavish Busby Berkeley aquatic number. (There are also full-out show tunes about ACT UP and bathhouse sex, and a romantic duet by two singing anuses.) Be warned: You may hate *Zero Patience* for its relentless absurdism and bland music. But I found it smart, funny and moving, a campy rebuttal of Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On* that reminds us of the insidious connection between public health and public relations. That book gave its name and good-vs.-evil narrative to the other, pious and irritating movie about AIDS epidemiology that appeared, all studded with caring stars, on HBO at the same time.

As subversive as both *The Living End* and *Zero Patience* are, my vote for best AIDS movie goes to a darker, more ambitious film that both is and is not about the epidemic: *Safe* (1995). Writer-director Todd Haynes addressed AIDS more obviously in *Poison* (1991), but that interwoven trio of shorts was a little ham-handed for my taste. Set in 1987 (the year then-25-year-old Haynes joined ACT UP), *Safe* tells the story of Carol (Julianne Moore), a housewife leading an insulated life in an expensive, pristine Southern California home. She feels vaguely ill -- fatigue, nosebleeds -- but doctors can't find anything wrong with her. She learns about "environmental illness," a malaise brought on by all the chemicals that surround us, from car exhaust to shampoo. AIDS per se comes up only elliptically: Talking about the death of a friend's brother, Carol asks, "Was it...?" The answer: "No, nothing like that."

Carol heads to a desert retreat for the immune deficient run by a New Age guru who has AIDS. But we can't tell whether he or Carol or any of the other unhappy campers is in flight from chemicals or society itself. Carol is on an all-consuming quest to remain immune not only to toxins, but also to disarray, the unpredictable, messes of all kinds. But how real is any state of "immunity"? To save herself, Carol abandons her home and family, and by the end, her world has shrunk to the

size of her own face in the mirror. And she still feels sick.

Does *Safe* belong in an AIDS-movie roundup? Absolutely. From its charged title to its brilliant metaphors of immunity, its AIDS subtext is more than suggestive. No other film has probed with such unsettling ambiguity how we name -- or find ourselves unable to name -- our fears in the age of AIDS. Of course, Haynes has no answers, and the questions mutate the longer you think about them. If that's not the infuriating hallmark of our efforts to wrestle with the epidemic, I don't know what is. And with AIDS vanishing from the post-cocktail landscape of popular "issues," *Safe*, cited by critics at *The Village Voice* as the best film of the '90s, is state-of-the-art -- the standard for any future filmmakers who don't believe in playing it safe.

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