POZ Picks

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PICK OF THE LITTER

Visions of Angels
Nelson Bloncourt and Karen Engelmann
Smithmark Publishers

The creators of this collection benefiting AIDS service organizations asked renowned photographers each to contribute a work depicting their vision of angels on Earth. Bring it home this winter and sit with it by a window. As you meditate on each page—lingering on PWA John Dugdale's stunning "My Spirit Tried to Leave Me," say, or Audrey Bernstein's haunting "The Drowned"—consider that the word *angel* comes from the Greek for *messenger*. Moved by its beauty, your fingers caress the image, and in that touch you feel love. And so the message is delivered.

—Kevin O'Leary

BOOKS

Let Nothing You Dismay
Mark O'Donnell
Knopf

Fans of O'Donnell's former *POZ* fixture, AIDS Zen, rejoice! His latest effort does not disappoint. The novel, set five days before Christmas, follows the exploits of the short, baby-faced, red-haired and gay Tad Leery. Being all of the above (though my mother says I'm not *that* short), I can verify that the way-over-six-feet O'Donnell gets it right. Tad, whether meeting up with an old ex or sizing up a future one, uses humor as a shield. Bad for him, but delightful for us. Two parts *Christmas Carol* and one part *Wizard of Oz*, the book is perhaps most successful as a collection of memorable epigrams from a twisted Dorothy (Parker, not Gale) in the AIDS era. *Let Nothing You Dismay*'s many one-liners are the perfect accessory for the new year.

—Kevin O'Leary

Starry, Starry Night
Jeanne Braham and Pamela Peterson

Lumen Editions

This picture postcard of Provincetown, Massachusetts' rich, enduring HIV community is like a wheat cracker: dry at first and hard to swallow, but with a salty sweet goodness. Organized as a gallery of portraits and spiked with terminally cute introductions and intrusive pontificating, the whole thing smacks of term-paper reporting. Still, the authors—a social worker and a creative writer—do succeed at local color, and there's a sense of revelation as the residents (including poet Mark Doty and a mogul–turned–minister) share stories of loss, love and struggle.

And don't miss the gossip about the pizza-parlor drag-queen fight or the moving account of the local AIDS Swim for Life. Here, the authors let the drama unfold, as one man "shivering in his Diana Ross outfit, wades further into waist-deep water." Who hasn't been there? In its commitment to faithfully portraying a close-knit community, *Starry* shines.

—Scott Hess

FILM

Hallelujah!
Directed by Catherine Saalfield
Artistic License Films

This documentary captures the essence of Ron Athey, a performance artist known for making art of the body and its fluids—hey, keep reading!—and a man with HIV trying to leave a mark, even if he has to make it on himself to do it.

Athey calls his shows temper tantrums with finesse. As the extensive interviews reveal his experience growing up in a Pentecostal family with a penchant for speaking in tongues, we understand the evolution of Athey's need to offer slices of himself to the public. Little Ron had to *work* to get attention.

And he gets it. The footage of Athey's performances—including not only the tattoos, piercings and other blood rituals but some moving tributes to those lost to AIDS—is a nice entry for those too timid to attend a live performance.

At 90 minutes, though, the video could use a few cuts of its own. Pigpen, my fave of Athey's troupe, put the dangers of testing the limits best: "You can only put so many tchotchkes on a bookshelf," she says, "before it looks cluttered." Amen.

—Kevin O'Leary

I'm Losing You
Directed by Bruce Wagner
Lions Gate Films

Bruce Wagner's indie adaptation of his own breakthrough novel satirizing Tinseltown was a hit at the Toronto Film Festival and is now being sold as a millennial *Player*–meets–*Longtime Companion*, starring Andrew McCarthy and Rosanna Arquette. The two of them working again? It must be a sign that the millennium approaches.

If you believe that facing a life-threatening illness entitles you to a movie deal, you'll die for these characters. Every tragedy—AIDS, cancer, the middle class—is fodder for their screenplay-in-progress lives.

All this is broadcast by Wagner's ironic title, which alludes not only to the familiar cri de coeur but to the cell-phone patter of LA's movers and shakers on the freeway of life. This film takes an interesting look at how "modern life" forces us further and further out of each other's range.

—Kevin O'Leary

Midnight Express–20th Anniversary Edition
Directed by Alan Parker
Columbia TriStar Video

This gripping, gritty 1978 hit has been rereleased in a remastered collector's edition. The incredibly beautiful Brad Davis, who died of AIDS in 1991 (his wife, agent Susan Bluestein, penned an account of their struggle, *After Midnight*), turns in a tour-de-force performance as Billy Hayes, an American college
student busted for drugs who suffers four years of torture in a Turkish prison and is denied parole just as freedom is in sight. It is fitting that the video has been repackaged, for knowing what we now do of Davis' life in Hollywood after his '85 diagnosis, a story of keeping your identity as the walls close in takes on a whole new meaning.

—Kevin O'Leary

THEATER

Stupid Kids
Written by John Russell
Century Theater, New York City

Is watching *The Real World* a spiritual experience for you? Do you still identify with the Ally Sheedy character in *The Breakfast Club*? If you answered yes to either question, you will likely be as raucous a fan of the season's off-Broadway sleeper *Stupid Kids* as half the audience the night I attended. Russell, a prolific playwright who died of AIDS in 1994 at 31, has a knack for identifying the Very
Important Issues that teenagers face in an increasingly vapid and thought-free world, and the young people in the audience hooted approvingly at the antics of four troubled youths at Joe McCarthy High.

A blond, gorgeous and popular boy-girl duo is slavishly followed around by two same-sex admirers who slouch, wear ratty clothes and probably have stinky breath. These outsiders use their wiles to try to make the hunk and hunkette love them—or at least accept them—and leave the "in" crowd, which seems to spend its time giggling at Friendly's. Needless to say, the Adonises are not only beautiful but stupid, shallow, unsympathetic and destined for dead-end jobs. The gay characters are natural Walt Whitmans—romantic, sharp as tacks and eerily insightful.

Not very original, eh? The half of the audience not laughing with sagelike comprehension was groaning inwardly and wishing for a helicopter to land onstage or something unexpected to happen. But the cast runs through its creaky lines with unaffected cheerfulness and manages to salvage a modicum of respect for at least the spirit of the play.

—Jeff Hoover

HISTORY LESSONS

Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman's New York Public Library show won raves last year for its visual presentation of gay life in the 20th century, but their coffee-table-ready encapsulation, **Becoming Visible (Penguin Studio)**, follows the tedious trend of wrapping queer history in a protease bow of "cautious hope." Because the information in the preceding chapters is so extensive, by the time you get to the last bit of the book—where the "gay plague" is fast-tracked from page 20 of the Times to Larry Kramer's living room to the birth and death of the many-headed ACT UP hydra—the treatment of AIDS seems so superficial. The era's art—like the Silence=Death Project's 1987 "AIDSgate" poster, and 1994's wheatpasted to-do list from Fierce Pussy—overpowers the lame text, which plays the horror of the disease as a series of triumphs of the human spirit, becomes a flesh wound that, once stitched up, will leave us good as new.

Yet hope abounds in the work of Peter L. Stein, who focuses his own indie documentary, **The Castro (WQED)**, exclusively on the astonishing past 30 years of the neighborhood gay San Francisco has called home. Early on, Stein introduces us to a woman who was one of very few young girls growing up in the Castro during the '80s. In an understated and novel take, she and her HIV positive father remember "the old days," and talk circles around the loss of virtually every one of her "uncles." Unlike the makers of Becoming Visible, she and Stein don't romanticize the AIDS crisis as a galvanizing force. Without slighting the wisdom gained from tragedy, they remind us that AIDS is what it is: an ugly and mean disease that's fucked everything up. This honest portrayal of a people limping mortally wounded into history does more than the glossiest, most well-researched coffee-table book ever could.

—Kevin O'Leary

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