Philly, the Sequel?

What Hollywood will now do with AIDS

April 1, 1994 By Casey Davidson

Now that Hollywood has a hit on its hands with Philadelphia, the first movie from a major studio about a gay man with AIDS, and now that Tom Hanks has won his Golden Globe for Best Actor and seems likely to win an Academy Award, will other studios jump on the AIDS movie bandwagon? It depends who you ask.

One movie currently in production that deals with AIDS, starring Whoopi Goldberg and Drew Barrymore, is called Boys on the Side. Joe Everett, publicist on the film, downplays the AIDS angle in the Warner Bros. August release.

"To categorize Boys on the Side as an AIDS movie is a disservice. The producers feel it would pigeon-hole the movie."

However, few other studios have any projects with AIDS themes on tap. The exceptions are a couple of successful plays currently being developed by independent producers: Jeffrey, a comedy written by Paul Rudnick and The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me by David Drake as well as Robert Altman's upcoming version of Tony Kushner's Angels in America and Barbara Streisand's much-hyped adaptation of Larry Kramer's play, The Normal Heart.

According to one studio head, there are plenty of scripts being circulated, but few have the right mix of a good story and strong writing. "If the door is open, it's only open if there are stories worth telling and filmmakers who are appropriate for the subject matter," says Marc Platt, president of TriStar, the studio that released Philadelphia.

In Hollywood, where the bottom line is certainly more important than art or social conscience, Philadelphia is a money-maker, grossing some $60 million so far at the box office. Normally, that would lead to a slew of copycat movies, like the westerns currently crowding the box office in the wake of the success of Unforgiven or the Vietnam movies after Platoon. But some observers doubt AIDS movies will become a popular genre.

"We could see AIDS as an incidental factor in film," says CNN movie analyst Martin Grove. "Philadelphia has made it an OK plot point, so that in the same way that people have cancer or asthma, they could now have AIDS."

Scott Robbe, an independent producer based in Hollywood, doesn’t agree. "Philadelphia is a film for middle America. With the box office staying strong, this movie will make someone in Iowa understand a little bit what it’s like to be gay or lesbian. Philadelphia is to gays what The Color Purple was to blacks. The beginning to better offerings," he says.

“The film business is so risky and the economic stakes are so high that when a picture succeeds you breathe a sigh of relief,” says TriStar’s Platt.

But, apparently, you don’t write a sequel.

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