Race With the Angels

A positive crew rocks the boat -- but doesn't tip it over.

March 1, 1999 By Degen Pener

Every other year since 1906, an intrepid armada of yachts races 2,225 miles from Los Angeles to Hawaii in the TransPac, a fiercely competitive trial of will, wits and salt tolerance. But the 1997 race marked three historic firsts: A crew composed almost entirely of HIV positive sailors participated, sailing a 56-foot racing sloop christened *Survivor*. In another milestone, the boat's chef, Ted Taylor, baked what was certainly the first soufflé in TransPac's history. And third, the entire journey -- from panicked hurricane warnings to petty on-board bickering to grief-haunted emotional outpourings -- was captured on film. The result is *Rock the Boat*, an inspiring tale about what it means to be an HIV positive survivor.

Due for a March release nationwide, the movie opens with the hectic days leading up to the big race. As a stressed-out Robert Hudson, a sailing enthusiast and former stockbroker, diagnosed in 1991, assembled his crew, director Bobby Houston, Hudson's lover and the only HIV negative crew member, filmed the proceedings. Fifty men tried out, but there was room for only 12.

Among the chosen were the hard-driving captain John Plander, the chatty, Christian kitchen-whiz Taylor, the sarcastic, hair-obsessed Richard Bartol and Mike Schmidt, who Hudson worried was too sick to make the trip. In short, the *Survivor*'s crew is as diverse as that of G*illigan's Island*'s *S.S. Minnow*. "I wanted to capture a common thread, that everybody is trying to 'stay in the race,'" Hudson says. He organized the project through Get Challenged, a nonprofit he founded to raise self-esteem by presenting vibrant images of people with HIV.

Once the race began, Houston had plenty of drama to record. For a week and a half, the crew sailed westward for a grueling 24 hours a day, with no land in sight most of the time. There were terrifying squalls, along with the threat of Hurricane Dolores crossing their path, before landfall in Oahu.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, harmony, triumph and challenging mortality are not the only messages that come across in *Rock the Boat*. Plander and Hudson fought so much on board that the two aren't talking to this day. "He wanted to win this race, and I wanted to get everybody across the finish line alive," Hudson says. "Big agenda difference." *Survivor* finished 19th out of 42 boats.

Hudson and Houston then shouldered the burden of putting out the film. Together they spent seven months editing more than 100 hours of footage, financing the film with their own money

and setting up distribution. They ignored the advice from a patron who believed they'd lose additional funding if they portrayed the crew members looking too healthy. "The 'keep them sick' mentality is kind of like the movie *Misery*," Houston says. "She kept breaking his legs."

So far *Rock the Boat* has been received favorably -- a hit on the festival circuit and picked up by HBO for a summer broadcast. Fans -- including directors Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone -- see it as a joyous celebration of life, especially given the number of crew members who had been close to death just a year or two before the race. And the crew has made the print circuit as well: The journey is the centerpiece of ads for Roxane Laboratories' antiretroviral Viramune.

Before the trip, the crew painted on the sides of the *Survivor* the names of "guardian angels" -- lovers, friends and famous PWAs who died of AIDS -- so that when each member turns to the camera and says, "I'm alive," we know exactly what they are racing for. Hudson vows that *Survivor* will compete again this summer, and at least seven crew members have committed. While new guardian angels will accompany them, not one of the names is from the 12 who made the original '97 journey.

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