To Die For

The Hours may be the best AIDS movie ever. That's high praise from Michael Musto, who howls when Hollywood does tragic PWAs.

February 1, 2003 By Michael Musto

I came to bury *The Hours*, not to praise it. The film was based on a highly regarded novel and those adaptations almost never work, especially when bathed in the Merchant-Ivoryish glow this one was rumored to radiate. Worse, another PWA-as-tragic-icon seemed like a bad idea in 2002, especially one who (shoot me) used to date a woman. But *The Hours* is magnificent, deserving all the awards it's nabbing -- and any icky misgivings about the Ed Harris character are dissolved by the immediacy of his portrayal and the fact that the flick refuses to serve up a single easy answer.

Lord knows movies are not where we usually turn for AIDS enlightenment, except for small flicks like *Parting Glances* ('86) and *Longtime Companion* ('90), made by people so close to the subject that the directors of both sadly ended up dead of AIDS. It wasn't until '93 that AIDS even got the royal Hollywood treatment with Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia*, in which a noble gay PWA (Tom Hanks, who won an Oscar for his sensitive performance) reaches out to a homophobic lawyer (Denzel Washington), both sides coming to appreciate each other against all odds. The 'phobe was the proxy for a lot of the audience, who ended up seeing beauty and poetry in the (diseased and dying) homosexual. But the closest Hanks and his onscreen lover, Antonio Banderas, got was at a party where they danced in sailor drag. The movie, a plea for sexual compassion, shied away from the sex stuff!

At least in Randal Kleiser's heartfelt '96 flick, *It's My Party*, Nick (Eric Roberts) has a boyfriend (Gregory Harrison), but the guy flees in terror because Nick has HIV. That was a realistic touch, actually -- denial was making neggies run big-time. Ex comes back when very sick Nick throws a farewell bash before killing himself, and the result made for a feel-good but deeply moving AIDS flick that nobody saw.

And that brings us to *The Hours*, the most lesbianic, AIDSy, sexually fluid, eye-openingly profound movie in ages, even if it proves that people are grappling with the same HIV issues -- fear of dying, fear of living, the need for solace -- as two decades ago. The Stephen Daldry-directed movie is based on Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer-winner about three generations of women -- author Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) in the '20s, writing *Mrs. Dalloway*; a '50s housewife (Julianne Moore), who's reading the same book; and a contemporary woman (Meryl Streep) as today's version of the nurturing but flawed Dalloway. The movie is a three-in-one study of troubled artists, their well-intentioned caretakers, and sadness that lurks behind all party-going. (Gee, I wouldn't

know about that!)

Ed Harris is superb as Richard, a gay poet about to receive a prestigious prize, which gives his ex-lover Clarissa (Streep) the chance to organize a congratulatory blowout for him. In fact, everything Richard does seems to offer Clarissa an excuse to go on living -- she feels empty and trivial, as expressed in a magnificent Streep breakdown -- though Richard's not so sure about the need for his own survival. ("I seem to have fallen out of time," he says wanly.) An ornery, brilliant PWA sick and tired of being kept alive by medications, he feels the award is consolation for simply having lasted this long. In the part, Harris has a sallow complexion, thin frame and woolen cap covering gray hairs; lesions line his upper chest. While HIV survivors might feel more validated to see the facial wasting and other effects of today's cocktails instead of this dated cliché, the scene is set sometime in the '90s.

And this film ain't no documentary. Harris doesn't writhe around, coughing and vomiting -- his performance is all suggestive emotion. By the end, Richard the visionary listens to his voices and decides whether it's worth carrying on, and -- like the rest of the movie -- it may not satisfy those who paid to see an MGM musical.

Another tragic AIDS icon? Maybe, but his character comes off like a full-throttle, doubting, extraordinary man, and that's the best AIDS representation possible. Still, why does it seem as hard for Hollywood to show us someone *living with HIV* as it is for science to find a cure?

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/To-Die-For-516-4354