Vito Russo’s Celluloid Closet Lives On

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It has been described, ecstatically, as the gay *That’s Entertainment!* As excited as the community is to see the documentary version of the book *The Celluloid Closet*, the anticipation is mixed with grief because the premiere comes five years too late for *Celluloid*’s author, Vito Russo, who died of AIDS in 1991.

“Vito really loved the movies. It was a major conflict in his life because he loved Hollywood films but he was so angry at them for the way they portrayed -- or rather didn’t portray -- his life,” says Jeffrey Friedman, a coproducer and codirector of the movie. Russo, who wrote a proposal for the documentary in which he outlined major themes and suggested the film clips he thought were most important, left a blueprint from which the filmmakers could build. And although Friedman finds the film “fun and engaging,” he admits that many feel it isn’t strident enough. Friedman defends his movie. “We set out to present 100 years of film images and to let them speak for themselves. There’s a lot of anger in the film when we show scenes of people hanging themselves and killing themselves. But we make films to draw people in, not to scream at them.”

Of the numerous celebrities who supported and appear in the film (including Tom Hanks, Whoopi Goldberg, Harvey Fierstein, Susan Sarandon, Shirley MacLaine and Tony Curtis), the most crucial is Lily Tomlin, who lent her name to the project in its early stages. “The film would not have gotten made without her,” says Friedman. But Tomlin is causing a commotion. In an interview with *The Village Voice*, writer Armistead Maupin (*Tales of the City*), who wrote *Celluloid*’s narrative, accused Tomlin of chickening out of a promise to reveal the secret in her own private closet while promoting the film. Friedman, the gentleman, won’t take on this battle. “All I am willing to say is that I’m disappointed with the way Armistead has used his involvement with the film to attack Lily. It hurts me to see her being treated disrespectfully.” In grand Hollywood tradition, the controversy is bound to draw an even larger viewership. Too bad we will never know what Russo himself would say.

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