AIDS Film “1985” Offers a Refreshing Take on a Familiar Topic

“Long-term survivors are grateful to have a film like this around,” director Yen Tan tells POZ in this Q&A. “They often feel forgotten.”

October 24, 2018 By Trent Straube

Don’t be fooled by the synopsis of AIDS-related film 1985, which opens October 26. It reads:

> Having been gone for three years, closeted advertising executive Adrian (Cory Michael Smith, of TV’s Gotham) returns to his Texas hometown for the holidays during the first wave of the AIDS crisis. Burdened with an unspeakable tragedy in New York City, Adrian looks to reconnect with his preteen brother, Andrew (Aidan Langford), while navigating his relationship with religious parents Eileen (Academy Award nominee Virginia Madsen) and Dale (Golden Globe award winner Michael Chiklis). When he reaches out to his estranged childhood friend Carly (Jamie Chung, The Gifted), their unresolved issues force Adrian to confront an uncertain future that will significantly alter the lives of those around him. Shot on black-and-white Super 16mm film, 1985 takes a unique look at a pivotal moment in American history through the prism of empathy, love and family.

To be fair, this does adequately summarize the movie (you can watch the trailer above). But it might also lead you to expect a well-trod tone and overly familiar tropes: awkward silences, bleak melancholy, the coming-out scene, the hospital bedside tearjerker, the family reconciliation, etc. Fortunately, 1985 pulls off the nifty trick of exploring these topics in unexpected and refreshing ways.

For example, when Adrian returns home for Christmas, he learns that his much younger brother is a big Madonna fan but that their Christian parents have confiscated his pop-music cassette tapes. Adrian gains his skeptical little brother’s trust and admiration when he tells him about attending Madonna’s Virgin Tour in New York City. Viewers get the impression that these two brothers have more in common than musical tastes, and we wonder how this relationship will play out.

To get more insight about this film, POZ emailed with writer and director Yen Tan, who spoke about his influences, the actors’ input and audience reactions.

“1985” director Yen TanCourtesy of HutcH

First off, what is your relationship to HIV and LGBT issues, specifically the early AIDS epidemic?

I encountered many men who were living with HIV/AIDS at one of my first jobs in the ’90s working at a viatical settlement firm in Dallas. [Editor’s note: During the early days of the epidemic, many

people with AIDS sold their life insurance for quick but discounted lump sums of money, known as viatical settlements.] Both the film short [also titled 1985, which preceded the current version] and the feature are attempts at relaying some of the stories they shared with me. I grew up in Malaysia in the ’80s. AIDS often made the headlines in a sensationalistic and uninformed way, which really influenced how I viewed my sexuality. In my adolescent mind, I just assumed the disease came along with being gay. I thought my life ahead was gonna be filled with pain, suffering and oppression.

POZ readers who have seen your film short 1985 [you can view it below] might be surprised at how different the feature film is. Can you walk us through how the film developed?

After completing the short, I thought about more themes I wanted to explore with the premise. Even though they’re not meant to be the same story, the short film ends at the character’s homecoming, and the feature begins from that point onward. I wanted to go deeper into a time where someone didn’t think he had the option of sharing his truth with his loved ones and what the emotional ramifications of that are.

1985 film short, from Yen Tan on Vimeo.

I don’t want to give away any spoilers, but I found the feature film to be notable and refreshing, in part because you do not give us the scenes one expects in a period AIDS drama. Did you start out with any goals of what you wanted to do (or not do) with this film?

The benefit of telling this seemingly familiar story today is that I can leave out the words AIDS and gay completely and the audience can still understand the context and what we’re not saying. This is something that feels true to its time, since they were such taboo topics, but it encouraged a more subtle narrative, as we no longer have the burden of “educating” the viewers.

What has been the response to the film so far? What has surprised you or pleased you about the responses?

There’s been a very consistent and, frequently, meaningful emotional reaction. I’m thankful that the film isn’t seen as something that brings up painful memories but could nurture a process of healing. There’s this idea that we should have moved past these types of stories, but I believe that there are still many stories about that time that haven’t been told because a whole generation of people were wiped out and they can’t tell us what they went through. It’s evident when AIDS survivors I’ve talked to are grateful to have a film like this around. They often feel like they’ve been forgotten.

View this post on Instagram

Our US theatrical key art!

A post shared by 1985 (@1985thefilm) on Aug 28, 2018 at 7:51am PDT

You've also covered gay relationships in small-town Texas in your movie Pit Stop. What draws you to this period and setting?

I've only made LGBT films set in Texas so far. I've lived here for more than two decades, so the locale feels like second nature to me.

You also wrote 1985. How did you research this period?

Along with the conversations I had at the early job, I read a lot of articles online and books by Paul Monette and Larry Kramer. Monette's Borrowed Time was particularly insightful. There's a quote early in his memoir that really stuck with me: "All I know is this: The virus ticks in me." That sense of running out of time is something that Adrian, our lead character, is always fighting against. It becomes both a reason and an excuse to avoid telling the truth about himself.

Did the actors contribute any HIV-related personal stories or insights to this project?

Cory Michael Smith did a lot of his own research, and he consulted friends who were impacted. @theaidsmemorial on Instagram was also an important resource for him. Virginia Madsen and Michael Chiklis lost a lot of friends in that era, so this story resonated with them on different levels too.

View this post on Instagram

@1985thefilm wishes you a happy pride

A post shared by 1985 (@1985thefilm) on Jun 11, 2017 at 9:04am PDT

Why the decision to film this in black and white?

Black-and-white evokes period, yet it remains a timeless aesthetic. I was drawn to the challenge of presenting the ’80s without the vibrant color palette of the era, as it was a very bleak and stark time for the gay community then. It was also a look that enhanced the dramatic nature of the story while diffusing the nostalgic qualities. I wanted the focus to be on the characters first and foremost, and black-and-white lends itself to that vision.

1985 opens Friday, October 26, in Los Angeles and New York City. For more details, visit 1985thefilm.com. Below is an interview with the cast, from when the film screened at the SXSW film festival.

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