15 Years of AIDS at the Oscars

From Philadelphia to Slumdog Millionaire, HIV has moved from the front row to Hollywood's back alley. Can Milk nurse AIDS awareness back to health? POZ's former deputy editor Bob Ickes weighs in on the issue.

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For HIV-positive moviegoers looking for any kind of validation or support from Hollywood, the 81st Academy Awards held a tad more promise than usual. The gala evoked a long-ago night, a big-deal anniversary. So we'll start there. Bear with us.

Tom Hanks won an Oscar 15 years ago for his performance in *Philadelphia* as Andrew Beckett, a gay white lawyer with a fabulous apartment and HIV. Hanks became the first performer to win for playing a person living with the virus—and dying of it. The story unfolds in 1993, before the advent of lifesaving drugs. If *Camille* and *Terms of Endearment* teach us anything, death becomes Hollywood.

Beckett was hardly the first "AIDS-afflicted" character to reach the screen. Bruce Davison gave a more nuanced performance as the HIV-positive character David in *Longtime Companion*. He was nominated in 1990 for an Oscar, but lost. The more obscure documentary *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* won Best Documentary in 1989 with a cast of real-life people with AIDS far more diverse in age, race and sexual orientation.

Philadelphia got bravery points for daring to make AIDS "mainstream" (it could have been called *Peoria*). That's why some AIDS advocates chose to tolerate its science-fiction-ish, sexless depiction of homosexuality and the film's tacit endorsement of that era's rather virulent stereotypes: that any movie with gay characters must necessarily involve AIDS and death—and that any movie with AIDS and death must necessarily involve gay characters, preferably gay white male characters with fabulous apartments.

These advocates point out that yes, of course, gay white men perished (and still perish) at an atrocious rate—but they question the mainstream media's insistence that the epidemic has only recently crept into the ranks of, say, straight people of color.

The significance of Hanks's win was not lost on him. He let loose 15 years ago with one of Oscar's most famous acceptance speeches (a clip was shown during this year's ceremonies). He proceeded to thank—and then "out"—his inspirational high school drama teacher, calling him a

“gay American,” and then, referring to all those lost to AIDS, said:

“I know my work in this case is magnified by the fact that the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels. We know their names—they number a thousand for each one of the red ribbons that we wear here tonight. They finally rest in the warm embrace of the gracious creator of us all—a healing embrace that cools their fevers, that clears their skin, and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident, common-sense truth that is made manifest by the benevolent creator of us all and was written down on paper by wise men, tolerant men, in the city of Philadelphia 200 years ago.”

The next year, Hanks won Best Actor again playing Forrest Gump in the movie by the same name. The character—an idiot and/or savant—has a love interest (a straight white woman, played by Robin Wright Penn) who dies of what is presumably AIDS. So does Forrest Gump also have what the film calls only “the cancer”? We’re never told—but it may be telling that we’ve yet to see a *Forrest Gump 2*.

Fast-forward to this year’s Oscars: Has Hollywood done what is simple and self-evident for HIV-positive people? The evening was hosted by Hugh Jackman, whose greatest artistic achievement (so far) is his Tony Award–winning portrayal of flamboyant showman Peter Allen, who died of AIDS in 1992. The Best Animated Feature Film, Pixar’s *WALL-E*, featured two songs from the 77-year-old *POZ* cover boy Jerry (*La Cage aux Folles*) Herman. Best Supporting Actress Penelope Cruz has played an HIV-positive character in *All About My Mother* and done much to fight AIDS in her native Spain and elsewhere.

The evening’s big winner, *Slumdog Millionaire*, may help bring some awareness to its setting in India. Strangely, HIV didn’t quite make the leap from the screenplay’s source, Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A: A Novel*. Its central character patronizes a brothel, where a sex worker says, “It is better to die of disease tomorrow than hunger today, don’t you agree?”

For the past 15 years, this sort of tangential trivia (and a few AIDS-related winners and nominations in the documentary short-subject category, including a nomination based on *POZ*’s reporting in Iraq) has had to suffice for advocates hoping the Oscar stage could turn their cause to gold. The red ribbon has turned green (for global warming) and pink (for breast cancer) and red again (but for heart health).

Indeed, an online parody of best-picture nominee *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*—a film that was written by *Forrest Gump* scribe Eric Roth—seems to speak for all of Hollywood when it notes the films’ similarities and concludes: “It’s exactly like *Gump*. Except no AIDS.”

Which brings us to the supreme—and energizing—irony of the 81st Academy Awards. Without any mention of “the AIDS,” best-picture nominee *Milk*—and the acceptance speeches of its Oscar-winning writer (Dustin Lance Black, a gay man who was raised Mormon and confronted his faith) and lead actor (Sean Penn, who thanked AIDS-quilt pioneer Cleve Jones)—has gone a long way toward galvanizing a new HIV movement.

Milk traces the life of legendary gay-rights pioneer Harvey Milk and his assassination in 1978, three years before the official premiere of what would come to be known as HIV. Who knows what would have become of Milk, a gay white man, had he survived that assassination—would he have gone on to contract HIV, as so many of his San Francisco constituents did? Would he have been able, along with so many of the earliest AIDS pioneers, to combat Ronald Reagan's lethal indifference? How many lives could he have saved?

Fascinating questions, surely, but Black and Penn spoke with the ferocity of Milk himself. They demanded that gays and lesbians be allowed to marry in California and across America, be guaranteed equal federal protections, be allowed to believe that God loves them, be allowed to foster a healthy self-esteem—and these pleas get to the center of HIV prevention.

For the past 15 years, *POZ* has reported from around the globe on how stigmatization—not just of sexual orientation but of race and gender too—can spur the sort of unprotected sexual behavior that leads to HIV/AIDS. It can and does delay people from coming forward for testing, from returning for their results and from thinking that their lives are worth living and/or saving.

It took the impassioned filmmakers of Milk and their "mainstream" movie—about a gay white man who never confronted AIDS as we know it—to extend the crusade for AIDS awareness in contemporary cinema. This new reality only heightens our anticipation of *Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire*, a champion at this year's Sundance film festival.

Due later this year, the independent picture, made outside the Hollywood fray, follows an obese, illiterate and abused 16-year-old African-American Harlem teenager pregnant with her second child by her father, from whom she contracts HIV. In her own quest for equality and self-esteem, she comes to explode many of the virus's demographic myths. *Push* was made by Lee Daniels, who produced the Oscar-winning *Monster's Ball*—who, by the way, was born in Philadelphia.

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