



Fearless Compassion

Reflecting on actress Sally Kirkland's legacy and her advocacy for people living with HIV.

April 1, 2026 By Mel England

My name is [Mel England](#). I'm an actor. Twenty years ago, I arrived in Los Angeles and was lucky enough to meet Sally Kirkland at the Hollywood premiere of *Adam & Steve*. My friend Craig Chester had written and directed the film, and I was blown away that he'd gotten Sally to play the minister who married the gay couple. As a young actor, I'd seen Sally while studying in New York and was awed by her. I was genuinely nervous to meet her in person. But she was so kind and asked me my name and looked in my eyes like I was the only person on earth. I left thinking I'd probably never see her again.

In 2008, I was cast in an indie film that got picked up and came out on Netflix. And then suddenly, I was diagnosed with cancer. Ten years earlier, I'd almost died of AIDS-related causes, so I was pretty much in shock by my new diagnosis. I mean, here I was just getting my life and career back from AIDS, and now, suddenly, I have cancer? What the hell, God? I was stunned.

I told Craig, "If I survive cancer, I'm going to make that movie I wrote no matter what!" After six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation treatment, I got the green light and was cancer-free! I called Craig the next day and told him the good news and he said, "So now you're making your movie, right?" I was like, "Oh, yeah...right!" I said I could do a reading but wondered who I could get to play my mother, since the actress I had before was in New York City. Craig said, "Call Sally Kirkland!" I was like, "Really?"

I called her up, and she told me to leave the script at her "office," which was the Silver Spoon diner, where she would hang out at with Shelly Winters. I dropped off the script. The next day I got a call at 9 a.m. It was Sally. She said, "I love your script. I'll do it!" She had some notes, which, of course, I took! We did the reading—naturally, she was great—and then she signed on to do my movie! I was blown away. It was the beginning of my nearly 20-year relationship with the acting legend.

Sadly, we never ended up making that movie, but a couple years ago, I started making another film directed by Billy Clift in which Sally plays my mom. *Here We Are* is currently in postproduction and will be out next year.

And so, I was one of the lucky people who got to know and work with Sally. She took me to Academy screenings and parties. I even got to go the Hare Krishna temple and chant and dance

along with her and Nick Nolte. So many stories! I also discovered that when Sally loved you, she supported you. And she did so with all her heart.

Mel England and Sally Kirkland

Courtesy of Mel England

Of course, I knew that Sally was one of the great actors of her generation, but I learned that she was also a painter, a great teacher and a producer. I always called her the Godmother of Indie Film because she literally worked with everyone—often when people were just starting out. She was a curator of artists. She was a serious artist. She was in a Warhol film and was at the forefront of the Off-Broadway movement in New York City, famously working on an anti-Vietnam War play with Tom O'Horgan of Hair. In 1969, while in her 20s, she wrote an op-ed in The New York Times defending her choice to perform nude onstage as an act of liberation for women and artistic freedom and also a protest of the war machine. She was fearless.

When Sally passed, Michael Musto, the former Village Voice columnist, wrote that Sally was a character actress in a leading lady's body. But I'd say she was an artist and a revolutionary in a movie star's body. She was at the forefront of a revolution in the culture of theater and film. Her Oscar nomination for a role in a small indie film opened the doors for generations of other indie filmmakers. And then, to really spice it up, she became an A-list sexy femme fatale in her 40s, breaking the mold again for women in Hollywood. Fearless.

And when she had problems with her breast implants and had them removed, she bravely spoke publicly about the experience. She became an advocate for other women and founded the Kirkland Institute for Implant Survival Syndrome. Fearless.

So there I was, getting to know her after my cancer scare. At the time, I was working on a solo off-Broadway show about my surviving AIDS and cancer. Some people in the business warned me it might be a mistake to come out publicly as an AIDS survivor as it wasn't something that was done. Just before I left for New York, I asked Sally what she thought. She told me, "Be fearless."

A few months ago, after Sally passed, Coty Galloway and I were closing down her apartment. We were going through her vast library of books about show business, spirituality and healing, and that's when I learned more about what Sally had done for people living with HIV and AIDS. In the early days of the epidemic, way before the cocktail, we all clung to books by Louise Hay, Marianne Williamson, books on healing people holistically with nutrition. In the early days, that's all we had. All those books were in Sally's library. When I opened them up, I saw that Sally had made notes, underlined passages to share as she ministered to people with AIDS who were dying. Back when doctors were wearing hazmat suits, she'd sign a release so she wouldn't have to because she wanted to hold people: hug them, love them.

Sally was on the front line of the epidemic. She was there: raising money for amfAR and AIDS Project Los Angeles, along with Elizabeth Taylor and Madonna. Fearless.

Along with the books, I found a copy of A&U: America's AIDS Magazine with Sally on the cover. Inside, was an interview with the headline "Saint Sally," which was about her advocacy work for people with AIDS. It was helpful to have a Golden Globe-winning and Oscar-nominated actress in a magazine talking about HIV. It gave people hope. It saved lives. I'd shared my story with A&U in 2009.

I looked at the date on Sally's cover. It was the December/January 1997 issue. I started getting chills right there in Sally's apartment. That was the same time I was in the hospital thinking I was going to die of AIDS.

A profile of Sally Kirkland from the December/January 1997 issue of A&U

And that's when I knew Sally was still right here with me. She had been there all along, cheering me on from my deathbed. And then cheering me on to be fearless, to be a revolutionary for love.

And that's what Sally is saying to all of us right now. "Be fearless. Be a revolutionary for love."

Thank you, dear Sally. I love you.

Sally Kirkland died on November 11, 2025. This is an edited version of a tribute I read at her memorial service in March 2026.

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