AIDS History and HIV Propel New Works of Art, From Page to Stage and Screen

Spend your summer with 1990s comic Frank Maya, an NYC lesbian who sees ghosts in 1984, a contemporary Brazilian chemsex partyer and more.

May 22, 2026 By Trent Straube

Considering that parts of the East Coast got scorched during a heat wave this week, it's not too early to talk about summer beach reads and air-conditioned entertainment. Several new works of art highlight AIDS history and people living with HIV. So grab yourself an Aperol spritz or iced coffee—and, if you're outside, lather on the sunblock—and take in these offerings:

Cover of “The Fight of Our Lives: AIDS in America,” by David Levithan and Gabriel DuckelsCourtesy of Penguin Random House/Knopf Books for Young Readers

The Fight of Our Lives: AIDS in America

If you’re not up to speed on HIV and AIDS, you can get educated and entertained at the same time with The Fight of Our Lives: AIDS in America, a new book by beloved author David Levithan (best known for his gay-friendly young-adult fiction, such as Two Boys Kissing) and University of Cambridge’s Gabriel Duckels, PhD. A mix of narrative nonfiction, interviews and reprinted works from the 1980s and 1990s, the book is written for ages 14 and up, but older readers will enjoy it on even deeper levels. Publisher Knopf Books for Young Readers describes The Fight of Our Lives as “a brief history of the epidemic, touching on key moments and figures, such as Ryan White, ACT UP, Larry Kramer and Anthony Fauci, Pedro Zamora from MTV’s The Real World, and the Names Quilt. Threaded throughout are poems, essays, and other creative works, in addition to first-person interviews and narratives. The most important takeaway is that we must remember. We need to know what happened and why. Our voices are powerful, and they can make a difference.”

Cover of “Waiting on a Friend” by Natalie AdlerCourtesy of Penguin Random House/Hogarth

Waiting on a Friend

If creative long-form fiction is more your jam, Natalie Adler’s debut, Waiting on a Friend, offers a unique exploration of the early 1980s epidemic. Available May 26 and published by Penguin Random House imprint Hogarth, the promo copy explains the story:

> “Renata is a young dyke-about-town who can see ghosts, something she’s doing more and more of lately as too many of her friends are dying of a new, terrifying disease. When Renata’s best friend Mark dies of complications from AIDS, Renata is devastated by the loss of the person she loved most in the world. And to her disappointment and increasing despair, Mark seems unwilling or unable to return for the proper goodbye they both were denied. While Renata waits anxiously for Mark, she must stay vigilant: a mysterious, police-like force has begun ridding their East Village neighborhood of anything abnormal or inexplicable.…
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> “Both heartbreaking and healing, tragic and triumphant, Waiting on a Friend is a magical retelling of queer history and a celebration of youth and camaraderie. With pathos and humor, empathy and an edge, Natalie Adler freshly reimagines the past for a new generation, reclaiming the spirit of resistance and determination that would become one of the era’s defining legacies.”

The Unfrozen Few

Randy Boyd is a five-time Lambda Literary Award finalist whose fiction explores race, sexuality and survival in the long shadow of the AIDS crisis. He was honored in the 2018 POZ 100, which celebrated people living with HIV who are 50 and over.

His latest novel, The Unfrozen Few, Book One: Welcome to the Future, marks his return to long-form fiction and launches a multi-book speculative saga. The series follows eleven people living with AIDS who were cryogenically frozen as part of a secret experiment in the 1980s and awaken in the 21st century.

Earlier this month, Boyd shared an excerpt of the novel with POZ readers. Click here to check it out.

Promo for “Can I Be Frank?” starring Morgan Bassichis at comedian Frank MayaInstagram.com/canibefranksho

Can I Be Frank?

Are you familiar with stand-up comedian and performance artist Frank Maya? One of the first openly gay performers to break into the mainstream, Maya grew up on Long Island, New York, in a large Irish-Colombian Catholic family, whom he lovingly parodied in his act. Maya died of complications from AIDS in 1995 when he was 45—one year before lifesaving antiretrovirals transformed the epidemic and nearly a decade before social media allowed the documentation and spread of his work.

Fast-forward nearly 30 years, and queer performer Morgan Bassichis, 41, happens to meet one of Maya’s brothers at an art space, learns of Maya’s work and becomes obsessed and creates the hit one-person show, Can I Be Frank?, that’s equal parts homage, séance and re-creation. Directed by Sam Pinkleton (Oh Mary!), the show first ran at La MaMa Experimental Club in New York City but is back by popular demand at SoHo Playhouse through June 27, just in time for Pride month.

Here’s a collection of reels featuring Maya’s comedy:

Not in New York to see the show? Don’t fret, you can get your Frank Maya fix on Vimeo, where one of his boyfriends from back in the day, the choreographer Neil Greenberg, has lovingly collected many of Maya’s appearances (including a 1991 interview with the esteemed Dick Cavett in which Maya recounts a “bitchy” Madonna attending one of his New York gigs). Also, frequent POZ contributor Tim Murphy recently interviewed Bassichis for his Caftan Chronicles Substack. Check it out as part of your deep dive into this delightful corner of LGBTQ and AIDS history.

Promo for “Experiment as Method, Care as Practice: Four Decades of HIV & AIDS Shorts”Courtesy of VisualAIDS.org

Experiment as Method, Care as Practice: Four Decades of HIV & AIDS Shorts

If arty edginess is more your vibe, Visual AIDS explores unconventional HIV narratives in the here and now. On June 4 in Brooklyn, Visual AIDS joins with The Film-Makers' Cooperative and MIX NYC to present 12 experimental films and videos spanning 1986 to 2024 for a program titled Experiment as Method, Care as Practice: Four Decades of HIV & AIDS Shorts. The Eventbrite details describe the screening and discussion as:

> "The program traces how queer and trans filmmakers have developed new visual languages to render the complexities of life and death with HIV, as the wider community simultaneously formulated ways to survive through it. The provision of care, the insistence on love, the question of pleasure, and the importance of self-documentation in queer life all continue to accrue new meaning and urgency across distinct, ongoing phases of the epidemic.
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> "By placing these works alongside one another, this selection seeks to both parse and pass beyond persistent representational tropes of life with the virus.… In this moment of sociopolitical urgency, these audiovisual evocations of resistance, resilience, joy, and subjectivity within HIV-affected communities bring the ancestral archive into dialogue with HIV/AIDS contemporaneity and futurity. Challenging the myth that AIDS is 'over,' this program elucidates the multifaceted and intergenerational narrative of the ongoing epidemic, and the ways in which HIV-affected communities have prevailed in spite of serophobic political, medical, and cultural paradigms for over forty years."

Poster for “The Passion According to G.H.B.” by Vinícius Couto & Gustavo VinagreCourtesy of Visual AIDS

The Passion According to G.H.B.

On June 19, Visual AIDS teams up with the Anthology Film Archives’ edgy queer series Narrow Rooms to present the U.S. premiere of The Passion According to G.H.B. A collaboration between queer Brazilian director Gustavo Vinagre and artist-director Vinicius Couto, the feature-length film is set in a São Paulo chemsex party (a modern-day drug- and sex-fueled private bacchanalia). Billed as a “magical-realist gay bedroom odyssey,” the film stars nonactors in improvised, experimental scenes, including those with sex along with “conversations between the men about their substance use, COVID isolation, HIV, PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis to prevet HIV] and Clarice Lispector’s beloved 1964 novel The Passion According to G.H.”

Cuoto, who stars in the film and drew on his own experiences living with HIV, previously worked with Vinagre on a short film titled chempassion for Visual AIDS’ annual Day With(out) Art, which premieres December 1 to mark World AIDS Day. You can watch chempassion along with other Visual AIDS video commissions on VisualAIDS.org. But a warning: If your goal is to cool down from the heat, you might need to turn up the AC and grab some extra ice while you watch this one.

Poster for “The Man I Love” starring Rami MalekInstagram/mk2films

The Man I Love

File this one under “Coming Soon.” It doesn’t have an official release date yet, but it’s already getting tons of buzz. Directed by American filmmaker Ira Sachs, The Man I Love had its world premiere earlier this week at the Cannes Film Festival in France, where it received a 10-minute standing ovation. Set in late 1980s New York City, it stars Rami Malek, who won an Oscar for portraying Queen frontman Freddie Mercury, who died of AIDS related illness. Here, Malek plays performance artist Jimmy George who faces an impending death from the virus but nonetheless seeks a vibrant, creative life. Deadline’s critic Peter Hammond writes, “Instead of focusing on the dark side as so many films and plays have done, this one celebrates the continuing desire to keep moving, to be unapologetically alive and energized to give all you have left to art.”

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