Long Forgotten

In a blog post titled "A Should-Be-Classic Film About AIDS Is Now on DVD," POZ copy chief Joe Mejía recaps the contributions of Buddies, the first feature film about AIDS. Here is an edited excerpt.

November 12, 2018 By Joe Mejía

What was the first feature film about AIDS? Chances are, you guessed Philadelphia (1993), starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. Wrong. Or maybe you guessed An Early Frost, starring Aidan Quinn (1985). Close—but wrong again. That's because Frost was a made-for-TV movie that premiered months after the correct answer: Buddies (September 1985).

The rediscovered and digitally restored Buddies, written, directed and edited by Arthur J. Bressan Jr., who died of AIDS-related illness in 1987, is now claiming its rightful place in history. It's all thanks to the efforts of film historian Jenni Olson, who worked with Bressan's sister, Roe Bressan, to secure the film rights, and cult-film distributor Vinegar Syndrome, which has issued a Buddies DVD/Blu-ray combo pack of the film. (Frameline Distribution hopes to make the movie available for streaming next year.)

Filmed in nine days in New York and Washington, DC, on a shoestring budget (even by 1980s standards) of $27,000, Buddies is a moving, intimate portrait of two very different gay men and their evolving relationship during the peak days of the AIDS epidemic.

In the film, reserved and apolitical 25-year-old David Bennett (David Schachter), a volunteer for "the Gay Center," is assigned to be a "buddy" to 32-year-old Robert Willow (Geoff Edholm), a fellow gay man who, abandoned by friends and family, is dying of AIDS-related complications alone in a quarantined room in St. Matthews Hospital in New York City.

Robert, an outspoken activist and onetime bon vivant, is asleep in his hospital bed, sick with pneumonia and Kaposi sarcoma, when David, clad in a hospital gown and a surgical mask (per hospital protocol), enters his room for the first time.

Initially, the two men clash, with David early on confessing in his journal: "I've never met a person like Robert Willow—he unnerves me." But over several months and many bedside visits, the men open up to each other and develop a mutual respect and love that surprises—and changes—them both. David becomes "woke," in today's parlance, while, aided by David's acceptance and affection, Robert achieves emotional catharsis in the face of his mortality.

David and Robert’s far-ranging, earnest conversations offer a primer on the early days of AIDS, spanning such topics as gay visibility, AIDS stigma and the willful lack of government funding for research and treatment.

On the one hand, the film is a work of fiction inspired by real life’s Buddy Program (launched in 1982 at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, GMHC), New York’s St. Vincent’s Hospital, and the countless gay men like Robert and David who died of and survived AIDS; on the other hand, it mirrors our present-day reality, where the criminalization of HIV, inequitable access to health care, and diminishing research funds serve as obstacles in the fight against HIV.

Much has changed since 1985, but the need for buddies persists, as evidenced by the relaunch of GMHC’s Buddy Program, which now, thanks to effective HIV medications, primarily pairs buddies with people living with—not dying from—the virus.

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