



# Looking Back at Longtime Companion

On May 11, 1990, the first widely released film about the AIDS epidemic hits theaters.

May 11, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

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On May 11, 1990, nearly a decade into AIDS's devastation of urban gay males (and other communities), *Longtime Companion* opened in theaters. Set in New York City and Fire Island, the film is divided into sections identified by a single date every year from 1981 to 1989 and centers on a group of gay friends and a heterosexual woman. Made for about \$1.5 million with an ensemble cast of mostly New York City stage actors, including Campbell Scott, Bruce Davison, Dermot Mulroney and Mary-Louise Parker, it was the first film about AIDS that had major commercial distribution, following the TV movie *An Early Frost* (1985) and the smaller indie films *Buddies* (1985) and *Parting Glances* (1986). In many ways, *Longtime Companion* paved the way for *Philadelphia*, the star-studded 1993 Hollywood AIDS weepie for which Tom Hanks won a Best Actor Oscar.

After initially failing to find broad distribution, the film was eventually picked up by The Samuel Goldwyn Company, whose executives felt strongly enough about its content to put it in theaters across the country despite believing it would likely not succeed commercially. Not only did the film end up winning a handful of indie-film awards, including at Sundance, it also earned one of its leads, Bruce Davison, a Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actor and an Oscar nomination. To everyone's surprise, the film earned \$4.6 million globally.

*Longtime Companion*—the title nods to how the surviving lovers of gay men who'd died of AIDS-related causes were referred to in obituaries—was written by playwright Craig Lucas and directed by Norman René, a duo that had been courted by Hollywood after they'd had success in New York with a few plays. However, they found little enthusiasm for their pitch about a story involving gay men and the AIDS epidemic. In a 2015 [oral history](#) of the making of the film, Lucas recalled of producers: "They all said more or less the same thing: 'What would you like to write about?' I would say, 'Something about the community out on Fire Island as it was hit by the AIDS epidemic.' And they would always respond with something like, 'Oh wow, great. But after that, what would you like to write?'"

The project was finally commissioned by Lindsay Law at PBS. But Lucas struggled to structure the screenplay until René suggested that he write it, almost documentary style and with minimal melodrama, as a story that begins on July 3, 1981 (the same day that *The New York Times* published its first-ever story about the AIDS epidemic, "[Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals](#)") and unfolds on exactly one day per year through 1989. In that time interval, as AIDS's death toll

mounts and reshapes NYC's gay community, at least two of the members of the film's white and generally well-to-do New York City friend group die, leaving the surviving characters (played by, among others, Parker, Scott and Stephen Caffrey) to become volunteers at GMHC before joining the AIDS activist group ACT UP, which formed in 1989.

By 2024 standards, *Longtime Companion* seems both bold and limited. On one hand, at a time when the grimness of AIDS had—ironically—played a role in bringing forth more openly gay characters in film and on TV, it was among the first films to show a group of gay friends behaving more or less like anyone else—sharing not only pleasure, fun and jokes but also grief and mutual care. It also, to a limited extent, showed gay men kissing and being physically affectionate with one another, not to mention using poppers, the euphoric inhalant often used on dance floors and during sex. And it offered a more or less accurate depiction of the trajectory of the epidemic in the lives of gay men and their straight friends (embodied primarily by the Southern-drawling Parker, in a succession of mostly awful hairdos) through the 1980s, from naive disbelief that the New York Times dispatch would amount to anything, to the emotional toll of one death after another, to lives shifting from sunny hedonism to caregiving, community involvement and even political activism.

On the other hand, despite being made at a time when the AIDS epidemic was clearly hitting communities of color hard, the film depicted those affected by HIV in New York as almost entirely middle-class or wealthy gay white men—the good-looking, stylish, physically fit denizens of Manhattan and Fire Island. The film included two minor characters of color: Henry, a gay Black nurse (played by Pi Douglass) who assists Davison in caring for his lover (played by Mark Lamos) as he dies and Alberto, a Latino man with HIV (played by Michael Carmine) who angrily rebuffs the help of his GMHC “buddy” played by Scott.

In the final scene, the film briefly addresses the political activism of the era, as Scott, Parker and Caffrey discuss the possibility of getting arrested at an upcoming ACT UP demonstration. The formerly bearded and preppy Caffrey even switched up his personal style to the late-'80s ACT UP look, including sideburns and the “Read My Lips” T-shirt depicting two male sailors kissing.

The film received mostly positive reviews, with Rolling Stone's Peter Travers [writing](#), “Funny, touching and vital, *Longtime Companion* is the best American film so far this year.” A distinct [exception](#) was Vincent Canby in The New York Times, who wrote: “Possibly because it is the first mainstream American film about AIDS, ‘*Longtime Companion*’ is a lot gentler and even more upbeat than it need be. It is instructional, mannerly and, with the exception of a couple of scenes and performances, insipid. It's as if it didn't want to offend people who don't want to think about the plague (but who probably won't go to see the movie anyway).”

Canby also savaged the film's focus on privileged white gay men, saying of Lucas and René: “They have chosen to see AIDS entirely in terms of the suffering of one small group of upwardly mobile, white, homosexual Manhattan men who have well-paying jobs, wear designer clothes, shop at Bloomingdale's and summer on Fire Island.” (At the time, queer critics, including Sarah Schulman and Michael Signorile, echoed this sentiment.)

Years later, Lucas acknowledged that narrowness but also noted that at a time when there was a “lack of dramatic representation in film” of queer people and people with AIDS generally, it was “an odd expectation” that one film should show the entire spectrum of the epidemic. (The first film that squarely addressed the epidemic in the Black gay community and got media attention was arguably Marlon Riggs’s experimental 1989 documentary *Tongues Untied*.)

Much of *Longtime Companion* was filmed in the Fire Island Pines—but during the cold and rainy preseason. (In the opening shot, set to Blondie’s hit “The Tide Is High,” Scott strips off his Speedo and plunges into the surf; later, he noted how freezing cold the water was.) The Fire Island Pines Property Owners’ Association strongly limited how much of the community the production could film, for fear of having the idyllic and hedonistic summer resort associated with AIDS (though, by the late 80s, whole households in the posh enclave had been decimated by the disease).

The final scene has become iconic: Scott, Parker and Caffrey walk along the beach, hoping to live to see a cure for AIDS and yearning to see their lost friends again, and see a huge crowd of deceased gay men—including their friend John (played by a 23-year-old Dermot Mulroney)—suddenly flood down the boardwalk onto the sand for a dream reunion, embracing those they’ve left behind.

Lucas has said that the ending was controversial: “I remember a friend of mine, a wonderful playwright, saying, ‘You know the dead aren’t coming back! They’re not coming back, goddamn it! Why are you giving us that happy, sentimental ending?’ I said, ‘I don’t think it’s happy at all.’” Indeed, in the very last shot, Scott, Caffrey and Parker are alone again on the beach, their fantasy extinguished.

In the years after the film was released, several people associated with the production, including director René, actor Brad O’Hare (who played a waiter) and hairstylist Dal Corso, died of AIDS-related illnesses. Somewhat remarkably for such an important cinematic document of an era, the only place to watch the film today is on [YouTube](#).