



# AIDS at the Oscars: Neglected, but Not Forgotten

HIV is most noticeable by its absence at the 82nd Annual Academy Awards—even when the virus was (or should have been) a major plot point.

March 9, 2010 By Bob Ickes

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At about 11:45 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, on Sunday, March 7, 2010, a voice rang through Hollywood's Kodak Theatre, and many who'd assembled for the 82nd Annual Academy Awards, plus the millions watching at home, were about to witness what they would mistake for the evening's only historical moment.

In fact, history had been made long before the red carpet had been unfurled; the neglected achievement concerned HIV and its place in film, in popular and unpopular culture, and the assumptions we make about who can or cannot—who does or does not—contract and live with the virus. But first, the Kodak moment.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the voice proclaimed, “please welcome two-time Academy Award-winner Barbra Streisand!”

She materialized to polite applause, extending her arm for assistance as she descended the three short steps to the microphone. Clearing her throat, she began to present the Oscar for best director. “From among the five gifted nominees tonight,” Streisand said, with all-about-me sarcasm, “the winner could be, for the first time, a woman!” (Kathryn Bigelow, for *The Hurt Locker*.) “Or it could be, also for the first time, an African American.” (Lee Daniels, a man, for [\*Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire\*](#).) She next praised the three nominees who were neither women nor African Americans.

Finally, saying “And the winner is ...” Streisand tore into the envelope, blinking at what she found inside. She looked out at the crowd, saying only, “Well, the time has come.” But for whom? Women? African Americans? White men? Every species, of every color, living in harmonic bliss, on some faraway moon? No, just one demographic, it was clear, could push this envelope. The audience, lost in suspense, went nuts, clapping, hooting, whistling, grateful for the only mystery the four-hour production could muster. Then Barbra Streisand announced, “Kathryn Bigelow!”

Streisand forked over the statue, and Bigelow was gracious in her thanks, even more so 10

minutes later, when she accepted a second award, for best picture. (Despite the orchestra's having played "I am woman, hear me roar ..." a salute so antiquated that it may tell us everything we need to know about the 82-year oversight.) *The Hurt Locker* traces the terrors of a U.S. bomb-defusing squad in Iraq, and she praised the thousands of troops overseas and those who've never come home.

By Oscar standards, however, the rest of the evening was devoid of social messaging (no pink ribbons for breast cancer, no crimson ribbons for heart health, no green ribbons for global warming, no power couple for social causes—a.k.a., Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, who had split the previous summer and in 1993 won a lifetime ban from joint Oscar-presenting after they made a very unscheduled plea on behalf of HIV-positive Haitian immigrants, whom the United States had shunted into refugee camps). And, indeed, for AIDS, there wasn't a single red ribbon, an accessory once considered no less essential than Meryl Streep's Jimmy Choos.

Yes, during the fashionista pre-show parade, the E! network did air ads for cervical-cancer awareness (FYI: Those living with HIV are much more likely contract it without proper screening and care). But for HIV activists, the true victory Sunday night lay in the mere existence of a film that had won six nominations, the one directed by Lee Daniels, the one called *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, the one that dared to suggest that someone who is simultaneously 1.) female and 2.) African American can contract HIV. And, for the first time, that actresses who play such a character can be nominated—and even win—an Academy Award.

Last year we lamented the Oscar tailspin that began after the great promise of Tom Hanks's win for playing an affluent, gay, white, HIV-positive man in 1993's *Philadelphia*. An affluent, gay, white, HIV-positive man, it should be added, who dies from AIDS-related complications, a man who affirmed the maxim, born long before the arrival of AIDS, that in the hallowed history of the silver screen, there's no more deadly disease than homosexuality.

But in the 16 years that followed *Philadelphia*'s burst of Oscar recognition, HIV crept into broader demographics, into varying genders, races, sexual orientations and economic ranks. It also, thanks to the advent of lifesaving drugs, became misperceived as "manageable." As in no big deal, easily treatable, the big Whatever! of pandemics. And so at the precise moment when HIV would seem to affect and compel more of us, when it would seem a less queasy-making storyline and an easier sell, it also seems less threatening—no match for hottie teen vampires.

Why, for instance, did [last year's](#) best picture, *Slumdog Millionaire*, omit passages from the novel upon which it was based, passages that detailed India's ravaging HIV epidemic, passages that were set in brothels and spurred characters toward greater awareness? Similarly, *Invictus* and *District 9*, two of this year's best picture nominees, are set in South Africa, where the HIV prevalence rate hovers at about 11 percent. Is it entirely unrealistic to expect the movies to at least flick at the disease? (Sure, one may graft onto *District 9*, an Apartheid allegory in which aliens are captured and trapped in shantytowns, some element of AIDS stigmatization, but that takes a heck of a lot of work, for which the viewer gets no extra credit.)

The knee-jerk, and not entirely unreasonable, response to these questions is typically some variant of “But the film isn’t *about* that.” Authenticity, it seems reasonable to suggest, is entirely about that. Props, then, to Morgan Freeman, who in *Invictus* played Nelson Mandela and who on the red carpet wore hand-crafted jewelry that would later be auctioned to benefit the Nelson Mandela Foundation—which, among other causes, assists people living with HIV around the world.

Of similar benefit is Lee Daniels’s film. *Precious* depicts a 300-pound Harlem teenager who is virtually illiterate. She is beaten and psychologically abused by her mother and repeatedly raped by her drug-addicted father—by whom she bears two children and from whom she contracts HIV. The film is set in 1987, helping explode the toxic myths that AIDS has only recently reached people of color and that it is still the sole province of affluent gay white men.

Everything about *Precious*’s world is neglected, forgotten, ignored—HIV is presented as but one symptom of a ruinous culture. It is about AIDS without being ABOUT AIDS. In this way, it aims to unite people living with hardships of all kinds, to cement a global community that Nelson Mandela embodies. And it is telling that the character was portrayed by a young woman, the 26-year-old (and HIV negative) Gabourey Sidibe, who had never before acted professionally, and whose life, like that of so many people living with HIV, now mixes the everyday and the extraordinary.

During the telecast, addressing Sidibe’s nomination, Oprah Winfrey pointed out that she had auditioned on a Monday, got the part on a Wednesday and “now here she is sitting in the same category as Meryl Streep.” She did not win the prize, but she made history. And where would the character Precious be today? The film’s message is one of uplift, of hope, and it is suggested that despite the horrors that chase her, she will survive HIV and blossom, though the HAART drug cocktail is still nine years away.

The actress who played her mother, Mo’nique, did win in the supporting category. At the end of the film, when Precious learns she is HIV positive, Mo’nique’s character declares that she herself couldn’t possibly be HIV positive because she and her husband never had anal sex. This misconception, part of the Everest of denial in which the character indulges, suggests that the mother may indeed be—in fact very likely is—HIV positive, making Mo’nique the first actress ever to win an Oscar for playing an HIV-positive character. Those hoping that she would somehow mention HIV in her acceptance speech were disappointed. Her making history—and the fact that the movie also won in the adapted screenplay category—would have to suffice.

During the HIV-in-film drought, the community has often had to look to the more obscure, short- and documentary-film nominees for an AIDS theme or connection. And though none of this year’s nominees touched directly on the topic, a winner for best documentary short dragged HIV, however unintentionally, into the limelight.

In what has been described as a “Kanye West moment,” Elinor Burkett, the cocreator of *Music by Prudence*, a documentary about a physically challenged Zimbabwean singer, grabbed the microphone from her collaborator, interrupting his kindly acceptance speech with a seemingly well-intentioned, but unintelligible, rant about what would appear to be universal caring and

acceptance.

It should be noted that Burkett is the author of the 1995 book *The Gravest Show on Earth*, which attacks all involved with AIDS care at that time, calling out doctors, the government, social service agencies, even AIDS activists for malfeasance and uselessness. At the time of the book's publication, *POZ* founder Sean Strub [told the Los Angeles Times](#), "That book is vicious. Where does such a negative attitude leave someone like me? I've got AIDS, and I'm so covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions that people run from me in airports. She is telling people like me that there is no hope, that there are no good guys, that all is lost. That is not constructive."

The *Times* followed with a quote from [Joseph Sonnabend, MD](#): "Anger is totally appropriate and her criticisms quite valid. A lot of individuals purport to be doing good work on this disease when in fact their eyes are only on the money."

Elinor Burkett...Gabourey Sidibe...Mo'nikue. Hear them roar.

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/oscars-2009-hiv-18137-4210>