R.I.P. Scott Robbe, an ACT UP Fighter and LGBTQ Film Producer

HIV activist Scott Robbe protested with ACT UP at the New York Stock Exchange in 1989, and he championed LGBTQ visibility in film and TV.

November 22, 2021 By Trent Straube

Scott Robbe, a TV, film and theater producer who created LGBTQ programs and a long-time AIDS activist who participated in groundbreaking ACT UP protests, died November 21, 2021. He was 66. The cause was blood cancer—myelodysplastic anemia—which he had battled for over a year, according to a statement from his estate. Robbe, who tested HIV positive in the early 1990s, had been in hospice care at his sister's in Hartford, Wisconsin.

An obituary post on Facebook by the group ACT UP NY Alumni described Robbe's history in activism:

> Robbe was a prominent member in the founding of two direct-action groups in New York City: ACT UP and Queer Nation NY. Robbe was a member of an ACT UP group, led by activist , that secretly gained access to the New York Stock Exchange in September 1989. Their goal was to protest and publicize the record high price of AZT, then the sole approved treatment for HIV/AIDS. Burroughs Wellcome eventually bowed to this nationally publicized activist pressure and lowered its price by 20%.
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> Robbe joined ACT UP New York after seeing the group protest at the White House in October 1987 during the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. He joined the group's Media Committee and took part in numerous protests. He also joined the newly-formed Queer Nation in March of 1990, helping to mount demonstrations across New York City aimed at queer visibility. Robbe was diagnosed as HIV-positive in the early 1990s.

The photo included in a different Facebook post, embedded above, shows several activists being arrested during the ACT UP New York Stock Exchange protest. Robbe is pictured far left. Commenting about the image, Staley posted, "Just noticing [Scott Robbe] snuck on a SILENCE=DEATH button for our perp walk. We definitely weren't wearing them going into the exchange. Always prepared, that boy!"

“Scott was a fearless activist, always on the front lines, whether he was protesting pharmaceutical company greed or homophobia at the Oscars,” said ACT UP New York veteran Ann Northrop in the Robbe estate’s statement. “And he was a total sweetheart.”

“Scott was one of those activists who didn’t flinch when our lawyers would warn us of all the possible charges and maximum sentences we’d face for infiltrating a powerful institution,” added Staley, who recently published his memoir Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism. “When it came to fighting for his dying gay brothers, he’d always reply, ‘I’m in.’”

While in New York City, Robbe produced numerous theater projects, including several with actor Harvey Fierstein. Robbe moved to the West Coast in 1990, where he worked on TV and film projects, many of which promoted LGBTQ visibility. These include the first LGBTQ comedy special for Comedy Central in 1993, called Out There, hosted by actor Lea DeLaria. Robbe was also part of the creative team behind the original Queer Eye for the Straight Guy series in 2003.

Robbe cofounded Out in Film, a Los Angeles–based group that protested representations in movies it found stereotypical and homophobic, such as Silence of the Lambs, JFK and Basic Instinct.

He is survived by his mother, siblings and their spouses, an uncle and several nieces, nephews and cousins. According to his estate, a celebration of Robbe’s life will be broadcast online early in 2022. Donations in his memory may be made to Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and ACT UP New York.

In related news, to read an excerpt in POZ from Staley’s book, Never Silent, see “Searching for ACT UP” and for an article on the memoir click “How Peter Staley Kept AIDS Denialism Out of ‘Dallas Buyers Club.’”

For recent obituaries of AIDS activists, see “R.I.P. Stephen Karpiak, PhD, Pioneering HIV and Aging Specialist” and “R.I.P. Shawn Lang, a Longtime HIV and LGBTQ Advocate in Connecticut.”

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