That ’80s Show

Three AIDS movies in today’s headlines depict yesterday’s epidemic.

November 11, 2013 By Trent Straube

Philadelphia

Hollywood history was made 20 years ago, December 1993, when the first mainstream AIDS-related drama, Philadelphia, was released. Not everyone loved the movie—Larry Kramer trashed it, writing in an op-ed, “Philadelphia is a heartbreakingly mediocre film” (and that was his nicest comment!)—but the courtroom drama topped the box office and earned Tom Hanks an Oscar.

Behind the Scenes: Director Jonathan Demme cast more than 50 people living with HIV/AIDS, recruiting many from Action AIDS Philadelphia; several died within years of filming. Also, gay icon Quentin Crisp and pioneering AIDS activist Micheal Callen both make cameos during a party scene.

In 1994, the family of Geoffrey Bowers, a lawyer who died of complications from AIDS in 1987, sued the team behind Philadelphia, claiming much of the film was based on Bowers’ story. A settlement reached two years later acknowledged that indeed parts were “inspired by” Bowers.

Dallas Buyers Club

Will Hollywood history repeat itself this holiday season with the release of Dallas Buyers Club? The Oscar-worthy Matthew McConaughey shed nearly 50 pounds to portray real-life rebel Ron Woodroof, a drug-using redneck and recovering homophobe who died of AIDS-related complications in 1992, but not before helping other people with HIV access alternative treatments. Jennifer Garner co-stars as his doctor, and Jared Leto plays his transgender business partner Rayon.

Behind the Scenes: Buyers’ clubs were popular before the 1996 arrival of modern HIV antiretrovirals. In addition to offering vitamins, minerals and herbs to its members, the clubs often sold experimental (and illegal) drugs, as well as meds smuggled into the country by the likes of Woodroof.

Test

Slated for a spring 2014 release but currently earning raves and awards in the film festival circuit is Test, written and directed by Chris Mason Johnson. Set in San Francisco in 1985, the movie follows Frankie (Scott Marlowe), the newest member of a modern dance company, as he navigates friendships and sexual freedoms amid the burgeoning AIDS crisis—and amid the newly available

test to detect HIV.

Behind the Scenes: Although the first AIDS cases were reported in 1981 and the virus was identified in 1984, there was no test for HIV until 1985. The first oral swab test arrived in 1994 and the first rapid finger-prick test in 2002. In October 2012, the first rapid, at-home, oral swab tests were sold over the counter and online. And just this fall, the FDA approved a rapid finger-prick test that's better at detecting acute infections (click here for more info).

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