Former Mayor Ed Koch Reviews HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE

October 12, 2012 By Peter Staley

Amazing how he fails to mention his own shameful role in this film, or this history...

Ed Koch Movie Reviews

“How to Survive a Plague” (+)

October 9, 2012

The plague referred to in this film is H.I.V./AIDS. The documentary describes the efforts of the organization known as Act Up to focus public and government attention on the crisis. Act Up was the brainchild of Larry Kramer who was also responsible for creating the Gay Men’s Health Crisis.

The plague began in 1981 when a handful of gay men in San Francisco were struck down with a new disease. It was a form of cancer initially referred to by doctors as the gay men’s disease or cancer. No known treatment was available. With the passage of time, drugs were developed that helped to delay death and deal with the opportunistic diseases, e.g. Karposi’s Sarcoma, blindness and pneumonia. Finally the protease inhibitor was developed which was capable of reducing the H.I.V. virus to zero, creating what has become known as the Lazarus effect. It was developed in 1996 which, while not a cure, treated the disease, making it chronic in nature, instead of a death sentence as had been the case.

During that 15-year period, some exceptional people in the gay community mastered the knowledge and medical jargon enabling them to speak knowledgeably about the crisis with doctors and scientists. They were able to move government and the private sector, primarily drug companies, to search for effective treatments. When the drugs were available, they pressured the pharmaceutical companies to reduce retail prices. The first widely-available drug during that period, AZT, cost $10,000 annually per person. Through demonstrations and a willingness to be arrested, Act Up was able to get that cost reduced. The civil disobedience tactics of its members also forced the FDA to make the drugs available earlier than normal, hurrying the tests, which was not always good.

While demonstrations were necessary to keep the issue on the front burner, Act Up protesters occasionally went too far, e.g., when they entered St. Patrick’s Cathedral, took communion hosts from the priest’s hands, and threw the wafers to the ground insulting many Catholics. Those

wafers are, for Catholics, the Body of Christ.

The person who makes the greatest impact in the film because of his superb speaking ability is Peter Staley. In his New York Times review of this movie, Stephen Holden describes Staley as: “A former closeted Wall Street bond trader with H.I.V. who left his job and helped found the Treatment Action Group, an offshoot of Act Up. Self-taught in the science of AIDS, the group collaborated with pharmaceutical companies like Merck in the development of new drugs.”

Others named in the Times’ review as major leaders of Act Up, which began its activities in 1987, are Larry Kramer, Robert Rafsky and Ann Northrop, all of whom appear in the film. I don’t know if these individuals were ever honored by the White House for what they did in fighting government and powerful corporations. If not, I urge President Obama to do so by presenting them and other leaders recognized by Act Up with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

This superb documentary directed by David France should not be missed. Regrettably, when I saw it on a Sunday at 2:00 p.m., there were only about ten other people in the theater.

I urge our Chancellor of Education to show the documentary in our public schools. It would teach children a lot of lessons, the chief one being the community can, working together, speak truth to power and win.

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