How to Survive a Plague, ctd.

January 19, 2012 By Peter Staley

In December, 2008, a journalist named David France came over to my Brooklyn apartment and told me about his dream of making a documentary that honored the history he witnessed of AIDS treatment activism in the late 80's and early 90's. From the heady-optimism of ACT UP's Treatment & Data Committee, to the painful split of ACT UP & TAG (the Treatment Action Group) just as the plague years were at their worst in the U.S., and finally to the remarkable research breakthroughs that made the death rate decline by 70%.

Three years later, David's film is done, and will be premiering at Sundance in Park City, Utah this Sunday. I finally got to see it Tuesday afternoon at a screening with David Barr, Sam Avrett, Gregg Gonsalves, and Catherine Gund. David France and his entire crew, including Joy Tomchin, Howard Gertler, Dan Cogan, Woody, Tyler, and seemingly dozens of others, should be incredibly proud. HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE honors this remarkable slice of history.

First things first -- doing justice to the entire history of AIDS activism, including the inspiring international work of today, would take a miniseries -- make that a megaseries -- lasting at least 30 hours long. Even then, there would be thousands of important stories left out. This medium -- film -- just can't capture it all. France's 100 minute documentary is just a small slice of this history. But there's no doubting that slice's significance, and as importantly, its potential to inspire others.

I found it almost impossible to view the film objectively. It brought me back to those years like nothing else I've seen (how could it not, since France decided to portray a handful of personal story arcs, including mine). Amazing found footage of early ACT UP meetings on Monday nights at The Center captured the wild mix of camaraderie, joy, anger, and empowerment that made us the epicenter of Gay America in the late 80's, and for all Americans, the social movement of its day. It took thousands of deaths before we were angry enough to hit the streets, and I remain amazed by the movement's resilience during the carnage that followed.

I suspect that this film will reopen old wounds for some from the infighting that led to T&Ds split from ACT UP, and the founding of TAG. We largely fell into two camps at the time, and for the most part, the film tells the story of those on just one side of that divide. But any story focused on treatment activism will never capture ACT UP's expansive body of work. I eagerly await Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman's UNITED IN ANGER: A HISTORY OF ACT-UP, which will begin to fill out this history even more.

Both of these films have a huge wall of resistance to climb - sadly, most folks don't want to hear

about AIDS these days, even most gay folks. That said, in this day and age, they are desperate for some inspiration, and for stories about people telling truth to power, and changing history for the better.

HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE does this. See it.

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