AIDS on the Silver Screen

Wondering what DVD to rent? Or thinking about hosting a movie night? Darien Taylor highlights a few AIDS-related movies worth watching.

“If you know your history, then you would know where you coming from.”
—Bob Marley, Buffalo Soldier

Though we come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, people living with HIV all share a common history: the history of the AIDS epidemic. But some 30 years into this epidemic, many of us scarcely know the stories that serve to bind us together as a community. Like the stories of most stigmatized identities, our shared history is difficult, painful and challenging, but it also speaks to the strength and resilience of people with HIV.

Movies offer us one way to connect to those stories and a window into the historical trajectory of AIDS. So, as the weather grows colder, why not gather together your friends with HIV and the people who love and support you around the modern campfire—the TV screen? Grab a warm blanket and a big bowl of popcorn and spend an evening learning the stories that unify us and make us proud to be who we are. A monthly movie night exploring the history of HIV could make for a cozy, inspiring, even therapeutic way to while away the cold winter.

THE BEGINNING IS AS GOOD a place as any to start your viewing. Two entertaining and informative films that deal with the origins and early history of AIDS are the docudrama And the Band Played On, based on the 1987 bestselling book of the same name, by American journalist Randy Shilts, and Zero Patience, an AIDS musical by maverick Canadian filmmaker John Greyson. And the Band Played On presents a scathing critique of government and medical responses to the emergence of AIDS. It sets out the facts, while Zero Patience assumes that you know these facts and weaves a campy Canuck yarn that turns these “facts” on their head.

And the Band Played On

And the Band Played On was first shown at the Montreal World Film Festival in 1993, then broadcast on HBO and later released in movie theatres. It takes us back to the early 1980s, as gay men in major American cities are beginning to die of an unknown illness. Doctors, politicians and gay leaders grapple, with varying degrees of competence, with the disease that would eventually become known as AIDS. Of particular interest is the film’s account of the ugly competition between French and American research labs to claim the dubious distinction of discovering the virus that causes AIDS—a competition that unfolds as the death toll mounts. The film also documents the attempts by public health officials to close gay bathhouses in San Francisco, in order to contain the spread of HIV, and the subsequent resistance from gay community leaders who see this as an attempt to control their lives. And the Band Played On introduces us to French Canadian flight attendant Gaetan Dugas, whose sexual exploits became a sort of gay urban legend in the late 1980s. As a result of Shilts’ investigative journalism into the origins of AIDS, Dugas became known as “Patient Zero,” the man who allegedly introduced AIDS to North America. (It is now known that this wasn’t the case.)
In addition to its sharp rebuke of politicians and AIDS researchers, this early Emmy Award-winning film brought Hollywood star power (including Matthew Modine, Lily Tomlin, Alan Alda and Richard Gere) to bear on what was still a relatively taboo subject. Recall that then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan did not publicly say the word AIDS until 1987, the year Shilts’ book was published—a full six years after people first became aware of the disease in the U.S. and after 21,000 Americans had already died of AIDS.

Zero Patience

CANADIAN FILMMAKER JOHN GREYSON’s surreal musical Zero Patience premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1993—the same year that And the Band Played On premiered in Montreal—and went on to receive much recognition in Canadian cinema and queer theory circles. Its plot is delightfully convoluted, involving time travel, a buoyant soundtrack by Glenn Schellenberg and a cameo role as Miss HIV for Michael Callen, an early American AIDS activist who championed the rights of people with HIV. The film’s title alludes to “Patient Zero” Gaetan Dugas, whose reputation, tarnished in And the Band Played On, is rehabilitated by Greyson, who portrays his engagement in early AIDS research as helping to establish AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease preventable through safer sex. The title also alludes to the urgency of AIDS activism. When Zero Patience came out, Greyson and others involved in the film said: “We wanted to explode the opportunistic myth of Patient Zero...[and] celebrate the courage and sass of an international AIDS activist movement that has tirelessly fought for the rights of people living with AIDS.”

Philadelphia

JONATHAN DEMME’S Philadelphia is a must-see film: It was the first mainstream Hollywood movie about AIDS to reach a broad audience. Philadelphia chronicles the final days of gay lawyer Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks, who won an Academy Award for his performance), who is unjustly fired from his law firm when his health begins to fail as a result of AIDS, and the dawning sympathy and politicization of his attorney Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington), whom he hires to defend him against this unlawful dismissal. Though Beckett wins his case and receives loving support from his partner, family and friends, there is no happy ending to Philadelphia, conceived of and brought to the screen in the early 1990s, when AIDS still conveyed a death sentence. Attending this film when it was first released, I recall that sobs could be heard throughout the darkened theatre as this film drew to a close—I was certainly trying hard to compose myself as the lights went up.
**IN ADDITION TO ITS NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE** at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2005, Nova Scotia resident Thom Fitzgerald’s film *Three Needles* was shown at the 2006 International AIDS Society Conference in Toronto. Starring Stockard Channing, Olympia Dukakis, Sandra Oh, Lucy Liu and Chloë Sevigny, this ambitious film tells three stories of HIV transmission worldwide. In rural China, the black-market trade in blood results in the spread of HIV throughout a small village. In South Africa, the myth that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS has dire consequences in an orphanage. And in Montreal, a second-rate porn star searches for a way to pass his mandatory HIV test despite the fact that he is HIV positive. Though this film sometimes sacrifices the facts about HIV for the sake of a more coherent plot, it is important in its efforts to engage with HIV issues beyond North America.

Viewing these four films—available at your local video store or on Netflix or Amazon—may inspire you to check out other movies about HIV. Last year, two major movies about AIDS, *United in Anger*, a history of the AIDS activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and *Vito*, about activist/writer Vito Russo, screened in theatres. And in Montreal, there’s the HIV/AIDS film festival *VIHsion*. Online you can check out some of the more than 100 fascinating interviews with members of ACT UP New York that make up the *ACT UP Oral History Project*.

Know your history: It will make you proud.

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The sister article “*Le sida dans le cinéma*” in *Vision Positive* explores HIV in French cinema.

**AIDS Goes to the Movies**

Here is a short list of the features and documentaries made in North America since the start of the epidemic:

* **AIDS: No Sad Songs** (1985) – First major Canadian doc made about what was at the time a taboo topic. Explores the social and emotional effects of AIDS on people living with HIV and their loved ones.

* **Parting Glances** (1986) – Indie film about a gay couple in New York City. One of the first American feature films to portray AIDS.

* **Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo** (1988) – Award-winning short that documents AIDS activists taking over the editorial offices of *Cosmopolitan* magazine after it ran an article claiming that a straight woman could safely have unprotected sex with an HIV-positive man.

* **The Ryan White Story** (1989) – Made-for-TV movie based on the true story of Indiana teenager Ryan White. In 1984, White became infected with HIV from contaminated blood treatment for his hemophilia and fought for his right to attend school after being expelled because of his infection.

* **Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt** (1989) – Academy Award-winning doc about the lives and deaths of people commemorated in the AIDS Memorial Quilt.


* **Zero Patience** (1993) – John Greyson’s AIDS musical about how the media, government and scientists responded
to AIDS in the ’80s.


**Angels in America** (2003) – A six-hour HBO miniseries adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play about the intertwined lives of people affected by the growing AIDS epidemic. Set in New York City during the Reagan administration.


**We Were Here** (2011) – Doc in which four gay men and one straight female nurse share stories about how they were impacted by the epidemic in San Francisco.

**Positive Women: Exposing Injustice** (2012) – Four HIV-positive women (including Claudia Medina, profiled in this issue) talk about the impact of Canadian laws that criminalize HIV non-disclosure.


**How to Survive a Plague** (2012) – Oscar-nominated doc about the activism of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and TAG (the Treatment Action Group) in the U.S. during the late ’80s and early ’90s.

**The Normal Heart** (pre-production) – The book and play written by activist Larry Kramer about his efforts to raise awareness about AIDS in the ’80s, to be turned into a feature film.

*If you have a favourite flick you’d like to add to this timeline, email us at [contribute@positiveside.ca](mailto:contribute@positiveside.ca)*
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