

Twenty Years of AIDS on Video

Documentaries, Dramas and Musicals Chronicle an Epidemic

By Michael James

This year marked the 20th anniversary of the AIDS epidemic, which was remembered by millions around the world this past December 1. Some reflected upon their lives with HIV, some remembered those lost to AIDS and others continue their battles against ignorance.

As the years passed, filmmakers chronicled their own experiences of the medical crisis, resulting in various films focusing on different aspects of the epidemic.

For some, these films may be grim reminders of a time that shouldn't be forgotten. For others they may be bold warnings so as not to be repeated. To a few, they are just movies.

Voices from the Front

This powerful film, the first feature-length documentary to comprehensively cover the AIDS activist movement in America, makes clear the emotional and political effects of community activism using the voices of those directly engaged...

It's a powerful distillation of pictures and words from events organized to change public consciousness, expose profiteering by pharmaceutical companies, and challenge government inaction and neglect concerning AIDS. As the late Vito Russo says in the tape, "We're going to fundamentally change the health care system in this country... I don't think it's stoppable now."

And the Band Played On

This HBO movie isn't looking for complexity; it's looking for a hero. It's convenient for the dramatic structure of the film — and it works to create sympathy for its own story. Don Francis, played by Matthew Modine, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, like his mythic male compatriots in Hollywood film, is doing overtime in compassion,

leaving jelly doughnuts uneaten on the diner counters, spending sleepless nights thinking, and settling for Chinese takeout in late-night sessions trying to get this 'Gay Related Immune Deficiency' thing figured out.

Lily Tomlin, as the cantankerous Dr. Selma Dritz of the San Francisco Department of Public Health, is on a righteous crusade, cruising the gay bathhouses, confronting the secret STD-doctors of the closeted elite, looking for solutions, providing the necessary outbursts. And Ronald Reagan is the worthy villain, at the top of the bureaucracy heap, announcing an increase in defense spending as Dr. Don scrapes away in his lab, looking for meager funds for a new electron microscope.

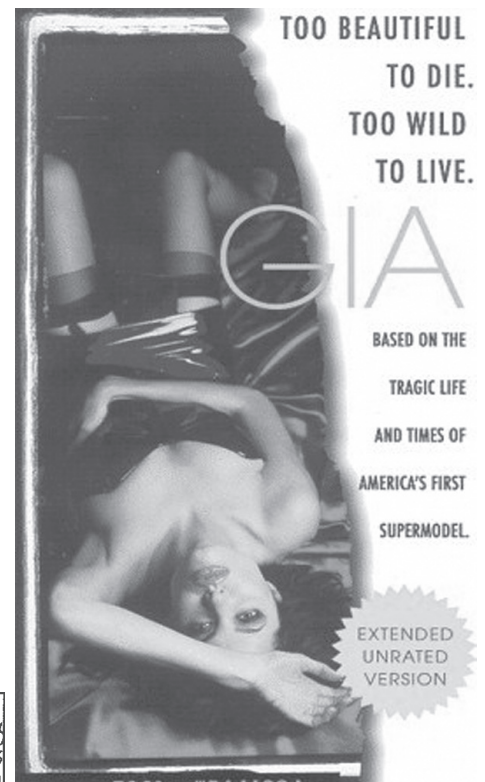
seem relentlessly determined to turn everything into a metaphor for AIDS.

Silverlake Life: The View from Here

This groundbreaking documentary about the lives of a gay couple facing the reality of living with AIDS won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival.

Silverlake Life by Tom Joslin (completed by Peter Friedman) intimately and painfully records the death of the author. We, like Joslin's lover Mark, are left alone and bereft by Tom's death, and the film offers no succor. [Unlike other AIDS films], *Silverlake* has no feel-good solution to the AIDS crisis.

While the mainstreaming of an AIDS



Zero Patience

John Greyson's *Zero Patience* is an AIDS musical that is to Hollywood AIDS stories like *Philadelphia* what Peter Duesberg is to the CDC: an annoyance.

Stubbornly agnostic, beautifully sentimental, this film manages to turn almost every AIDS paradigm on its head. The primary message of the film, as its makers describe it in the liner notes to the CD, is "to expose the epidemic of blame that has accompanied the AIDS crisis."

Specifically, they want to rescue "Patient Zero," the flight attendant who purportedly brought AIDS to North America, from his undeserved posthumous villainy. They succeed, using synchronized swimming, song and dance, nubile young men, talking assholes, and Fantastic Voyage-style life rafts. Over the top? Maybe, but it's a surreal medium for a surreal disease.

These reviews have been compiled from many sources, including TLA Video, Gay.com, PlanetOut and others.



Gia: The Tragic Story of a Supermodel

Feisty and openly gay, Gia was a breath of fresh air in the fashion world of her day; sadly, she was also one of the first women to succumb to AIDS.

The stylized film follows Gia as she self-destructs with drugs, and eventually becomes one of the first women to fall prey to AIDS. Angelina Jolie is a captivating and hot Gia; there are some great sexy scenes, a few naked romps, and enough jumpcuts and retro disco to get your blood moving. Faye Dunaway is the fashion maven, Wilhelmina.

Rock the Boat

An inspiring and surprisingly exciting documentary following an all-gay, all-HIV-positive crew of amateur yachtsmen competing in the grueling Trans-Pacific yacht race.

The crew includes, among others, a scruffy Valley dude, an old salt, a fey cook who used to be a man of the cloth, a nervous landlubber with low T-cells, a full-blown AIDS sufferer with a sunny disposition and an over-zealous, risk-happy captain — and every one of them takes turns waxing poetic about success with protease inhibitors or pontificating about their greater purpose. It's touching, but it gets a little old. These guys

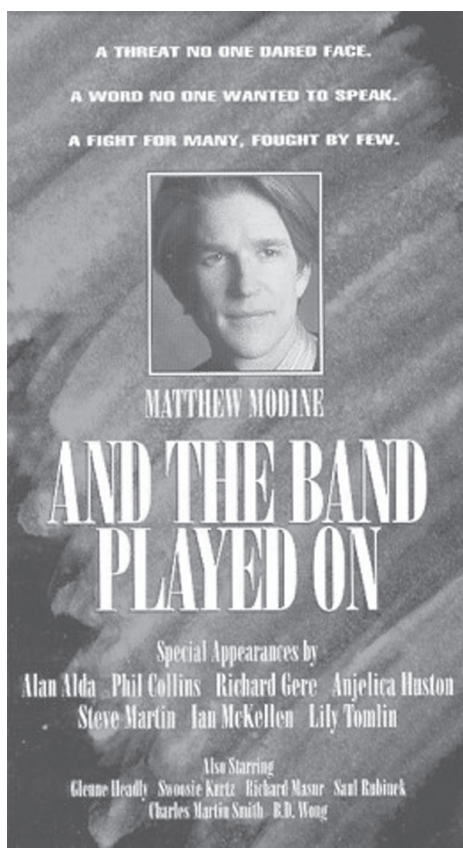
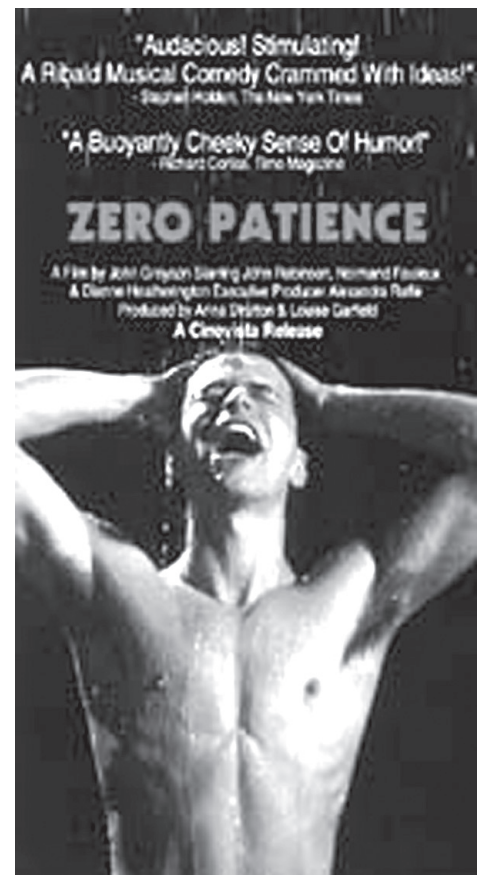
narrative demands that the audience be carefully drawn into the AIDS crisis through appeals to a common humanity, *Silverlake* spares its audience nothing, and in fact attempts to involve the viewer in a spiral of pain, isolation, frustration, and fatigue.

Together Alone

Two young men have gone home together for the night. Bryan and Brian. They've had an intimate encounter of unprotected sex. As the film opens, Bryan wakes from a dream and soon after, so does Brian. But Bryan calls his bedmate 'Bill.' This starts the first of many rifts as the two embark on an 85-minute verbal odyssey.

It's one of those all-night discussions where you tell a perfect stranger things you would never tell your closest friend. They recount stories from college. Reveal inner secrets. Argue and console. It's their attempt to make sense of their lives, the world around them, their attractions to other men, AIDS, and why their socks never match when they come out of the dryer.

Winner of the 1995 San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival Audience Award for Best Feature.



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