

3d- How “Philadelphia” Has, And Hasn’t, Changed How We See AIDS,

In 1988, screenwriter Ron Nyswaner got a distraught phone call from filmmaker Jonathan Demme. Demme’s best friend had just been diagnosed with AIDS — then a death sentence that promised unspeakable suffering. According to Demme, the only thing he knew to do with his grief and terror was to make a movie about the disease, and he wanted to know if Nyswaner would make it with him. “My response was immediate. I said, ‘Of course.’” At that time, AIDS had been ravaging the country for seven years, devastating an entire generation of gay men and stoking a palpable and unshakable panic. It was no less than a public health catastrophe, but the entertainment industry had done almost nothing on a major scale to depict it.

Anti-LGBT prejudice had only just started in the 1970s, but the hysteria over AIDS in the 1980s had literalized the lie that LGBT people were dangerous. An openly gay lead character still felt practically impossible, let alone one with a terminal illness. In that hostile environment, making the first mainstream movie about a gay man with AIDS could have seemed exceptionally daunting. To have a real impact within the culture, however, Nyswaner and Demme quickly realized they had to take the biggest swing possible with their film. Nyswaner said. “We knew we wanted to make a mainstream, commercial success ... that would appeal to the largest audience possible.”

They succeeded. *Philadelphia* opened on Dec. 22, 1993, and was an immediate hit. The film was No. 1 at the domestic box office two weekends in a row. Tom Hanks won the Oscar for Best Actor for playing the film’s hero, Andrew Beckett, a gay lawyer with AIDS, and Bruce Springsteen won an Oscar and multiple Grammys for his haunting song “Streets of Philadelphia,” which opens the film.

After their initial conversation, Demme and Nyswaner settled on the reassuring structure of the courtroom drama, which would allow an audience to watch their protagonist actively participate in fighting discrimination. After Andrew is suddenly fired from his prestigious law firm, he suspects it’s because the managing partners realized he’s gay and has AIDS, two facts he’d hidden from them. Andy decides to sue for wrongful termination. The only lawyer who will represent him, however, is Joe Miller (Denzel Washington). He initially begs off working with Andy out of his fear of AIDS and loathing of gay people, and only agrees to take the case after he witnesses Andy experiencing the kind of casual discrimination in a law library that Joe knows all too well as a black man trying to build a career as a lawyer. Joe’s slow-burn friendship with Andy ends up forming the heart of the movie.

Watching *Philadelphia* today, though, what is even more striking is how Andy and Miguel’s relationship as a loving, committed couple *still* feels uncommon — in any mainstream entertainment. Of all the potentially controversial elements in *Philadelphia*, the scene that often caused audiences to react with the most vocal incredulity when it first played in theaters was when Andy and Miguel visit Andy’s entire family at his childhood home, and they shower them both with unequivocal love and support. American attitudes about LGBT civil rights have undergone such a radical transformation in the last 25 years that it’s bracing to recall a time when it was such an accepted truth that gay people were universally rejected by their families that portraying otherwise came off like a preposterous fantasy.

If the depiction of Andy’s family has caught up with the times, the element of *Philadelphia* that feels the most of its own time is the character of Joe — namely, his flagrant homophobia. In one early scene, Joe spells out to his wife how much the idea of gay people and gay sex repulses him. At the time, Joe was meant to be the surrogate for the vast majority of the film’s intended audience.

The most poignant and heartbreaking aspect of *Philadelphia* now is how it stands as one of the only documents — and certainly the most well known — of what it meant to be alive at that time, and of the people who no longer are. On Jan. 1, 1995, just over a year after the movie opened, the New York Times reported that of the 53 people with HIV or AIDS who appear in *Philadelphia*, 43 had already died. “I watch the movie with a lot of grief,” Nyswaner said. “I knew most of those people. So to me, I’m looking at a photo book of people that are gone.” In the same breath, however, Nyswaner described making the movie as a “joyful” experience. “It’s all very personal,” he said. “I understand that there’s a sociological aspect to this movie, but it was the greatest two or three years of my life in many ways. ... The set was filled with joy.”

adapted from Adam B. Vary, *BuzzFeed News Reporter*, December 4, 2018