

How to Survive a Plague

The plague is AIDS, and this documentary is perhaps the definitive film version of how a group of its victims-cum-activists turned their fight against AIDS/HIV into a national crusade. The story, at times poignant, at times blaring, at times thrilling, is told by filmmaker David France in a forceful chronology.

The film begins in 1987, with the epidemic still largely ignored both by government and health organizations, when the activist group ACT UP, largely made up of HIV-positive participants from Greenwich Village, emerged. Energized by both fervor and fear, these activists took on the challenges that public officials had ignored, raising awareness of the disease. Further, within the TAG (Treatment Action Group), they researched their own malady to become experts in virology, biology, and drug chemistry. The movement pushed, at times raucously and viscerally, to make officials pay attention and to place the AIDS topic on to the national agenda (one sequence depicting the period shows the AIDS quilt on the National Mall in 1992). Their efforts led to the discovery of effective AIDS drugs, what has become known as the “combination therapy,” that stopped an HIV diagnosis from being an automatic death sentence.

First-time director France (who has covered the AIDS crisis for 30 years) culls his film from a massive amount of archival footage—much of it shot by the ACT UP protestors themselves. With no voice-over narration, the narrative is at first difficult to follow, loaded with protest meetings that seem merely chaotic. Eventually, however, the principal players appear, and the movie achieves a sense of momentum in the desperate search for a vaccine.

Some of the “players” in this real-life drama will be better known than others, like radical advocate Larry Kramer (author of the play “The Normal Heart,” recently performed here at Arena Stage). But other lesser-known heroes surface, like bond trader Peter Staley, lawyer David Barr, writer Mark Harrington, chemist Iris Long, and activist Bob Rafsky. We learn that some of these figures die, like Rafsky, but most dramatically, we see, at the end of the film, those—like Kramer, Staley, Barr, and Harrington—who survived and attained the grey hair and attendant wrinkles they deserve.

This is, finally, a very American success story of how grass-roots activism and dogged protest can sometimes achieve grand objectives, but a story that has, in the last decade or so, been somewhat forgotten as AIDS/HIV has morphed from fatal into semi-controlled. It’s good to be reminded of its force, and of the movement’s eventual triumph.

(The film runs 120 min. and is not rated.)

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