

## Philadelphia

*Philadelphia* comes to Washington much hyped, touted as “controversial” and “daring,” the first major Hollywood product to deal with AIDS and the gay community which constitutes a majority of its victims. Forget the hype, Jonathan Demme’s humane, intelligent entertainment is worth seeing as both a slice of contemporary urban life and as a display of virtuous film acting. It is a figurative tapestry, its warp and weft equal parts social document and courtroom drama, woven over a frameloom of, surprisingly, “family values.” The film’s depiction of family as necessary and sustaining offers both content and contrast to other elements, adding poignancy and density to the basic conflict.

That conflict is played out in the suit Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), hot shot lawyer and AIDS victim, brings against his law firm for firing him because of the disease (the firm claims he was let go because he nearly lost a major case). His lawyer, homophobic ambulance chaser Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), reluctantly takes on the case and, thereby, has his eyes opened to a new world. Andrew leads a cultured and circumspect gay life with his permanent partner Manuel (Antonio Banderas) and remains snugly in the bosom of his own close and understanding suburban family (to add to the familial, Mr. Demme casts his own “Cousin Bobby”--Robert Castle--in the role of Hanks’ father). Joe’s life is more rough-and-ready (he’s a lawyer who advertises on TV), but his family links are equally strong: he clearly adores his wife and is ecstatic with the birth of a new daughter.

To show how Joe both takes on Andrew’s case and comes to truly understand his client, director Demme sets up two epiphanies for him. The first is in a local library where Joe runs across a dogged but very sickly Andy trying to prepare his own case and suffering from discrimination as a librarian tries to isolate him from other users. Andrew’s quiet fortitude convinces Miller that this man deserves his help. The second epiphany, and the movie’s dramatic apex, comes when Andrew, in his apartment with Joe, tearfully accompanies Maria Callas singing “La Mamma Morta” from Giordano’s opera “Andrea Chenier.” Beckett, paraphrasing the aria while hitched to a mobile IV, is so nakedly confessional that Miller realizes he must attain the best award possible for this man.

That part of *Philadelphia* which is social document is the most dutiful. Elements of the Ron Nyswaner script, which this reviewer happened to see in an early stage, read like an AIDS primer, with by now standard lines about the nature of its lesions, its means of transmission, the attempted treatments, etc. The filmmakers undoubtedly thought these elements were necessary to inform a national “mainstream” audience about the nature of this scourge, but such show-and-tell, while apt and unflinching at times, will hardly be big news to media-wise denizens of Capitol Hill. This “finally-the-truth-about-AIDS” on the big screen is the least of reasons to see *Philadelphia*.

The courtroom drama, roughly the last third of the film, is done intelligently, if conventionally. The law firm, Wyant and Wheeler, is represented by the demure yet steely Beth Conine (Mary Steenburgen) and their cause is led by a venerable and smug senior partner Charles Wheeler (Jason Robards). Washington’s Miller, a fellow low on resources but loaded with smarts, is all dynamism and brilliance. His case is capped by

the final testimony of Andrew. A shriveled, pasty shadow close to death, he delivers an encomium to the law he loves and bares his sore-caked chest to a wincing jury. While the courtroom action is occasionally off-base--some of Washington's statements would be open to judicial challenge--they are basically played sober and straight. There are distinctive touches, too, as when the opposing lawyers directly address the film audience (as "jury") in opening arguments.

The real worth, the ultimate strength of this motion picture, however, comes down to the performances, and these come glowingly recommended. Tom Hanks, of course, has a dream role as the AIDS sufferer, struggling manfully against the odds and his wasting disease while retaining our sympathy as a bright, life-affirming fellow. The close-ups of his botched face are relentless and allow for no vanity on the part of the actor. Likewise, you feel his soul is bared as the Callas aria sweeps over him. His final image on life supports is both sympathetic and pathetic.

Yet as fine as Mr. Hanks is, to this reviewer, the performance that is most compelling and resonant is that of Denzel Washington, closing out a busy and triumphant year for one of our best film actors. The fact is that Andrew's transformation is almost all physical. Things happen to him as the disease takes over (and Hank's makeup becomes almost as important as his delivery of lines), while Joe's character must show inner change, a much trickier task. Beyond the fact that he is just eminently watchable, Washington shows an evolution of spirit that is the most heartening thing in the film. His Joe Miller comes out of the trial without, one suspects, real sympathy for the gay rights cause but with respect for and understanding of his worthy client--who happens to be gay. To his credit, Mr. Demme strives to keep Washington's role complex and real, as when Joe, already well along in the well-publicized trial, is congratulated and mildly propositioned by another black man. His is no gentle reproof of the offer, but a furious physical reaction to it, meant to show he's still no "pansy," a move absolutely consistent with his character.

Jonathan Demme's films are often enlivened with intriguing, telling character roles. *Philadelphia* can claim several. I would note is Anna Devereaux-Smith, who does a neat job as a paralegal with Wyant and Wheeler. Among the battery of lawyers Beckett and Miller must contend with, I thought Mary Steenburgen, playing against type as the tough-cookie Conine, was the best, with Jason Robards somewhat overplaying the snarling legal patriarch. I like Demme regular Charles Napier as the lantern-jawed judge--mainly because I simply like Mr. Napier's presence in Demme's films!

The director has likewise surrounded himself with a roster of technical talent who have worked with him over the years, people like cinematographer Tak Fujimoto, editor Craig McKay, and production designer Kristi Zea, among others. Overall, their work here is efficient, unaffected, and contributes firmly to the narrative. However, there is one tactic which Demme and Fujimoto seem to have adopted which is overly modish, and, worse, disconcerting: the fad of full-screen super close-ups which both cut off features of the actors' heads and grossly magnify epidermises--as if this were somehow more "real." Spun off from the likes of "60 Minutes," "reality TV," and bad, documentary-style commercials, it's time this "in-your-face" device was given a rest.

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