

Longtime Companion gives viewers too little, too late

Film pares AIDS to dimensions of soap opera

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Longtime Companion, the first full-length movie from a major studio to focus on AIDS, opens with a tableau of health. The year: 1981. The place: Fire Island. A young man sprints along the beach, then peels off his clothes and bounds into the surf with the abandon of a child. The camera hunkers in close as he splashes and grins. Music foams up in the background like the top of a gentle wave.

Cinema

You know the rest.

The year: 1990. The place: Oregon, where 454 people have died of AIDS and most of us, regrettably, know too much to take this movie for the simple soap opera it is.

In an apparent effort to appeal to "mainstream" audiences, the filmmakers have scrubbed the subject of AIDS so glossy and clean that it's slipped right out of context.

Longtime Companion, set up as a series of vignettes from 1981 to 1989, tracks the lives of eight main characters. Seven of them happen to be gay men. Five of them happen to get AIDS. Four of them die. And, if one is to accept the insulated setting in which all of this takes place, none of these events are related, by cause or consequence, to homophobia, money, classism, media or politics.

Remove that context, and what's left is a slippery little movie about eight friends, some of whom get sick and die, some of whom learn a few things about compassion and loyalty, and one of whom speaks up at the end to tell us What It All Means.

As if we hadn't spent the last nine years wondering that ourselves, and finding that no answer is large enough for the question.

According to promotional material from Samuel Goldwyn Studios, director Norman Rene wanted to make a movie about "people with whom audiences could identify." And indeed he has. The characters in Longtime Companion are as recognizable as Wonder Bread, and about as interesting.

Sean and David — a TV writer and a wealthy investor, respectively — share their Fire Island summer rental with visitors Willy (our protagonist — you can tell because of all the close-ups) and his friend John. The



summer of 1981, Willy meets and falls in love with Fuzzy. This character, with his beard and shy, goofy manner, shows some promise. But Fuzzy sheds his klutzy charm as the movie progresses, leaving him indistinguishable from the others.

In Manhattan lives another pair — soap opera actor Howard and his lover, Paul, whose job requires crisply ironed shirts and a secretary. Their next door neighbor, Lisa, is Fuzzy's best friend from grade school.

At the film's opening, we meet these characters just as the first story about AIDS — known then as "gay cancer" — startles them from page A20 of the New York Times. Some of them scoff, some worry, some don't read the paper.

What's wrenching about these scenes is their ability to evoke the time before AIDS,

months when the news, often late and frequently wrong, filtered through the community and changed life in ways that can never be changed back. We know this, but the characters don't, and the series of sexual encounters that end the first sequence carry an ominous punch along with the pleasure of seeing men embrace and kiss on the big screen.

By the end of the next section, in 1982, the camera peers down toward a hospital bed, where John lies sweating and wheezing into an oxygen mask. It's a distant shot — the disease still at arm's length from most of the characters' lives — but drawing closer by the moment.

Longtime Companion does a tolerable job of showing the range of personal responses to AIDS, from Willy's frantic hand-scrubbing in the hospital bathroom of his AIDS-stricken friend to the New Age-tinted suggestion by a minor character that people who love themselves won't get sick.

What's perplexing about this movie is not only the way AIDS is stripped of its social context, but the way the characters themselves slip noiselessly from denial to acceptance and compassion. In one scene, Fuzzy tells his friend Lisa he'd never volunteer at an AIDS organization and frankly hopes he'll never hear the word again; a few scenes later, he's taking phone calls at a hotline, with no explanation for his shift in attitude.

In a series of scenes that seem almost accidentally well-acted, David rises to the occasion of Sean's illness with stoic determination to make his lover comfortable

and let him die at home. The exchanges between these two, as David first tries to compensate for Sean's failing mind, and finally nurses him towards death, evoke tears and win points for their quiet realism.

On one level, AIDS is about that sort of purely personal circumstance — a friend who won't kiss another friend, a man helping his lover die. But there's another level, too, and it's entirely missing from Longtime Companion. In an effort to play safe politically, this film has no politics at all. No one gets blamed; in fact, hardly anyone even gets angry. In the final scene, Willy, Fuzzy and Lisa discuss a protest that suggests ACT UP-style activism, but the conversation is so casual viewers might miss the hint.

The film ends in the setting in which it began — the beach at Fire Island. Fuzzy (now shorn of his beard), Willy (he's added a moustache — see how times change?) and Lisa walk in the sand. In contrast to the movie's bubbly opening, the mood now is sad, contemplative.

"It seems inconceivable, doesn't it? That there was ever a time before all this?" Willy asks.

Listen, our memories are not that short. But our tolerance ought to be. If there's anyone out there who's been asleep the last decade, maybe they should wake up and see this film. But for the rest of us, who had our eyes shocked open long ago, Longtime Companion is more of a benign, brief acquaintance, telling us so much less than we already understand.



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