

DANCING THROUGH a CENTURY of SCREEN IMAGES



Clockwise from top: Last Call at Maud's, Orlando, Prick Up Your Ears, And the Band Played On, The Crying Game and Consenting Adult

A year ago we held our collective breath awaiting the release of *Philadelphia*. If it had a big opening weekend, we were told, 200 films about AIDS would go into production the following week. It would do for HIV and AIDS what, 11 years earlier, *Making Love* was supposed to do for the subject of gay men in general.

Philadelphia was successful, but the other AIDS films haven't followed. *Jeffrey* has been shot on a minimal budget in New York, and Barbra Streisand is still trying to decide whether *The Normal Heart* will be her next project or the one after that. Robert Altman hasn't started on *Angels in America*, Francis Coppola hasn't mentioned his AIDS film lately, and *Outbreak*, about a killer virus, will probably have as much direct connection to HIV as *Dying Young* or the remake of *The Blob*.

But we're used to reading between the lines, because that's where our stories have always been told.

The success of *Philadelphia* has been attributed to the popularity of its star, Tom Hanks. Because of its subject, industry thinking goes, it didn't gross as much as his films on either side of

it, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Forrest Gump*. In Hollywood, unlike with a box of chocolates, we always know what we're going to get: screwed.

The real queer cinema breakthrough last Christmas season hasn't been talked about as much. *Mrs. Doubtfire* earned three times as much as *Philadelphia*, despite having gay actors Harvey Fierstein and Scott Capurro portraying a gay couple. It wasn't their movie—the main character was a straight man in a dress—but they quietly showed that a gay relationship can be more stable than straight ones, and they were casually affectionate without doing anything that would send people screaming from the theater.

The point was reinforced a few months later—with only one gay actor, Simon Callow, in the gay couple—in the sleeper hit *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. That the funeral involved one of the gay characters was no more surprising to historians of queer cinema than the fact that the film was neither made nor released by a major Hollywood studio, but the overwhelmingly gay-positive aura surrounding its heterosexual love story was a pleasant shock.

All three films were made primarily for straight

While there have been lesbian and gay filmmakers as long as there have been films, most have been hidden in the closets of history

by Steve Warren

audiences. The difference was that those who went to see *Philadelphia* expected to be lectured to and taught a lesson, as they expect to hear a sermon when they go to church. *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Four Weddings* made their points more subversively, through pure entertainment. If the lesson sneaks in while you're laughing, it's harder to dismiss.

When we talk about breakthroughs in queer portrayals in Hollywood movies we're talking in relative terms. The real advances have always come from independent and foreign films, and movies made for television, including cable.

Beyond the situation comedies and dramatic series, most of which, in the last 20 years or so, have done an obligatory "gay episode" (and a few—*Mary Hartman Mary Hartman*, *Soap*, *Foley Square*, *Roseanne*, *Melrose Place* and the original concept for *Love Sidney*—have had continuing queer characters), television has consistently been more progressive than the cinema in dealing with gay and lesbian issues. Consider *That Certain Summer*, *A Question of Love*, *An Early Frost*, *Consenting Adult*, *Our Sons*, *And the Band Played On*, and *Tales of the City*. Where did we get the expression "too much for television"? These were too much for movie theaters.

It was less risky to make these films for TV, yet this "limitation" helped them reach a far wider audience in a single night than they would have in months of theatrical exhibition.

Dancing in the closet

In *The Celluloid Closet* the late Vito Russo cites *The Gay Brothers* as probably the earliest queer image on film. Made in 1895 by William Dickson at the Thomas Edison Studio, the experimental film showed two men waltzing together. It would be many years before the screen would even hint at what happened when the music stopped.

While Hollywood confined us to stereotypical roles in comedies (e.g., 1923's *The Soilers*), the Germans dealt openly with male homosexuality in *Different from the Others* (1919), *Mikael* (1924)

and *Sex in Bondage* (1928); and with lesbianism in *Pandora's Box* (1928) and *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931). The Third Reich put a stop to it as surely as the less blatant fascists who instituted Hollywood's Production Code in the early 1930s.

The 1961 British drama *Victim*, with gay actor Dirk Bogarde as a closeted lawyer confronting blackmailers who preyed on queers, was revolutionary in its day. Hollywood was just changing the MPAA Code to allow homosexuality to be dealt with openly, as long as it was "treated with care, discretion and restraint." That meant essentially that gay men and lesbians had to be villains or, if decent people, still had to be punished—usually by death—for their "sin."

Television has consistently been more progressive than the cinema in dealing with gay and lesbian issues. Consider That Certain Summer, A Question of Love, An Early Frost, Consenting Adult, Our Sons, And the Band Played On, and Tales of the City.

Continued on next page