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Hot Docs 2012: United in Anger: A History of ACT UP



By the time ACT UP was founded, more than 40,000 Americans had already died of AIDS. That was in 1987. Another victim was dying, on average, every few minutes. It had been a massive, horrifying crisis for years, but the government was essentially doing nothing about it; Ronald Reagan hadn't even publicly used the word "AIDS" yet. Ignorance, fear, and homophobia were being allowed to run rampant. 50% of Americans thought people with HIV should be quarantined. 15% thought they should be forcibly tattooed. The FDA was dragging its feet on getting new medicines approved and pharmaceutical companies were selling the one available drug at infuriatingly marked up prices. The church was opposing AIDS education, and even Cosmo was spreading misinformation, running an article in early 1988 that suggested women didn't really have to worry about the disease at all. They weren't at risk, the magazine figured. Condoms were unnecessary. Meanwhile, women and people of colour were dying more quickly than anyone else.

ACT UP, as the emotional new documentary about the history of the grassroots organization shows, was created by the gay community in New York City to change all of that. To educate, and especially to make noise – as one activist in the film suggests, "To put it in your face and make every person understand the devastation of the disease." Armed with slogans like "SILENCE = DEATH", they organized protests and acts of civil disobedience in order to make sure that AIDS couldn't just be ignored. They protested at the White House, the FDA, the NIH, the CDC, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the stock exchange, Grand Central Station, CBS News. Even two decades later, watching their events unfold is deeply moving: widows scattering their partners' ashes on the White House lawn; sit-ins being broken up by riot cops who drag sick but defiant AIDS victims across the pavement and into waiting paddy wagons.

The film follows the group from its very first community meetings through to what became, as one interviewed activist recalls, a national AIDS civil rights movement. Along the way, it shows how the movement's major protests were conceived, organized and executed. And those organizational details give the film much of its power: it's not just an upsetting documentary, it's an inspirational one. As the co-producer of the film, Sarah Schulman, explained in the Q&A after the screening, it has taken "people yelling for 20 years; dying for 20 years" for attitudes to change. "Thousands of people fought until their deaths." Abandoned by the rest of the country as their friends and lovers died all around them, AIDS activists learned how to stand up to the government, to big business, to the church, to hatred and to a plague. The documentary shares those lessons. The Hot Docs programmer who introduced the film suggested that United In Anger: A History of ACT UP is "a textbook for other activist groups." And Schulman agreed. "The purpose of this film is to show that regular people can change the world," she explained, "and to show you how they did it, so we can do it again."

- Adam Bunch

United In Anger will be screening in Toronto again as part of the Inside Out festival on May 25 at the Lightbox at 5:15pm. More info [here](#).

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