



Robert Epstein, photographed by Stephen Higgins

Robert Epstein: Getting the Word Out

Though Robert Epstein is not the most prolific filmmaker in this book, the six feature documentaries he directed or co-directed have made a massive cultural and political impact. In the mid-1970s, Epstein joined a filmmaking collective led by filmmaker Peter Adair, co-creating the landmark documentary *Word Is Out* (1978) that represents a broad spectrum of gays and lesbians from across the United States. The film's simple message is powerful: gay and lesbians are your neighbors and co-workers; they are indeed everywhere. As interview subjects describe painful family situations, stories of discrimination, and their decisions to come out of the closet, a true portrait of gay and lesbian experience emerges. *Word is Out* reveals the raw power of documentary film to capture oral histories, and to this date has stood the test of time.

Epstein then embarked on *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), a film that would have a profound effect on a generation of gay men and lesbians and win an Oscar for best documentary feature. Epstein had been fascinated by Harvey Milk, the adept San Francisco city councillor who managed to become the first openly gay American politician elected, the result of a clever grassroots campaign and his folksy appeal. The charismatic Milk challenged homophobia throughout California, leading the successful campaign against the Briggs Initiative, a bill that, had it become law, would have banned gays and lesbians from becoming teachers. In 1978, after clashing with both Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone over a variety of issues, city councillor Dan White entered city hall and assassinated both Milk and Moscone. The murders left the city in shock, but the aftermath was perhaps even more horrifying: White's lawyers successfully defended their client using the now-infamous "Twinkie defence," arguing that White was not of sound mind because he had consumed too much junk food; he was ultimately convicted of voluntary manslaughter.

As the release of *The Times of Harvey Milk* was celebrated, the burgeoning AIDS crisis was creating an entirely new set of challenges for the gay community. One of the earliest artistic responses in San Francisco was a funny and poignant stage production entitled *The AIDS Show*. In 1986, Epstein again worked with Adair to capture this vital work on film, which aired on PBS that same year.

In 1987, Epstein formed the film company Telling Pictures with his life and filmmaking partner Jeffrey Friedman. Their first co-directed project, *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* (1989), again concerned

the AIDS crisis and won an Oscar, memorializing those commemorated in the mammoth AIDS quilt project. In *Common Threads*, as in *Word Is Out* and *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Epstein and Friedman tell their story by profiling several compelling subjects; in this case, a number of people—gay, straight, white, black, Latino, male, female—all of whom were affected in some way by HIV and AIDS. Among them is Vito Russo, a close friend of the filmmakers and the author of the landmark book on gay and lesbian representations in cinema, *The Celluloid Closet*. Produced for HBO, the documentary is a powerful testimony to the humanity of those facing down the pandemic.

By the early 1990s, Epstein and Friedman embarked on what has arguably been their most ambitious project: a film adaptation of Russo's book, *The Celluloid Closet*. Through film clips and first-person testimonials, the film illustrates how a litany of negative depictions of gay and lesbian characters over the decades both inspired and fuelled homophobia in film audiences. By mixing politics and entertainment, Epstein and Friedman pleased critics and audiences alike. The film was released in 1995, at a crucial moment in the American cinema, when a new group of gay and lesbian filmmakers was emerging, among them Rose Troche, Todd Haynes, and Gus Van Sant, all of whom were depicting queer characters on film in new and exciting ways. *The Celluloid Closet* is as much a celebration of a new chapter in cinema's evolution as it is a look back at Russo's original thesis. That film was followed by *Paragraph 175* (2000), in which Epstein and Friedman interview gay survivors of the Nazi internments, narrated by British actor Rupert Everett.

Epstein's filmmaking style is ostensibly basic, but a closer look at his oeuvre reveals a canny ability to empathetically convey human emotion and tell stories often overlooked by traditional accounts of history. I spoke with Epstein in the summer of 2006 from his San Francisco home.

How did you first get involved with documentary filmmaking?

It was through the film *Word Is Out* [1978], which involves some back-story. I was nineteen years old and I had taken a leave of absence from college back on the East Coast, where I grew up. At the time—this is 1974—I was dealing with coming out, and like most people of my generation I was convinced I was the only one. I was both running from and toward it, trying to figure out what it all meant. For me, it meant leaving everything that I was familiar

with—college, family, and the East Coast—and getting on the Grey Rabbit, a hippy bus which you could ride from New York to San Francisco for sixty-five dollars. When I arrived in San Francisco, I didn't know anybody. My first job was cleaning empty apartments. After a few months, I answered a classified ad in *City Magazine* which said, "We're working on a documentary on gay lifestyle and we are looking for a volunteer production assistant, no experience necessary, just insane dedication and a cooperative spirit." It also said that they were looking for a "non-sexist gay male" to work on the project—very '70s. I applied for the job and met Peter [Adair] and his sister Nancy. They had just begun work on what would eventually become the film *Word Is Out*. They brought me onto the first shoots and I never left—it changed my life. *Word* was a three-year project and I went from being a volunteer production assistant to one of six filmmakers in the Mariposa Film Group—Peter Adair, Veronica Selver, Lucy Massie Phenix, Andrew Brown, Nancy Adair, and myself. The collective directed the film under Peter's guidance as producer.

That must have been an amazing experience, both as a filmmaker and as a gay man coming out.

Yeah, it was such a confluence. What drew me to that project was all very personal in nature. The whole experience of making *Word* was a search for community and self-identity. It opened up the world to me, and it set me on a professional path that led to *The Times of Harvey Milk* [1984].

When you were making *Word Is Out*, it obviously was an entirely different time compared to the current reality TV world where people are more familiar with cameras capturing their every move. How did you gain the subjects' trust? Were some people reluctant to appear on camera?

It's hard to articulate how different it was then—the pre-Internet world, pre-reality television world, pre-documentaries-in-the-theater world. We were on the threshold of coming out of the dark ages. The way we approached people about potentially being in the film was personal and very one-on-one. Each member of the group went to different parts of the country, often starting in familiar locations. For example, I actually ended up going back to my college town where I discovered a gay bar as well as one of the main sub-

jects in the film. People were willing to appear on camera primarily because they trusted our intentions. But it wasn't always easy. One of the most difficult things was to find people in the corporate world, those who had a professional life while also attempting to have a gay-identified life

What then led you to the Harvey Milk project? Did you know Harvey?

I did know Harvey. I was in my late teens/early twenties living in the Castro while working on *Word Is Out*. Harvey owned a camera store in the neighborhood. I would take film to him for developing and prints. That's how I knew him. I wasn't following his campaigns or working for him at that point—my life was all about making *Word*. When it was released in 1977, it was also the start of the whole Anita Bryant campaign. [Bryant, a popular singer and orange juice promoter, led prominent anti-gay campaigns in the '70s and '80s.] That was the first wave of the fights we're still fighting. The Anita Bryant campaign begot the Briggs Initiative campaign in California—on the ballot as Proposition 6—which was intended to prevent gay people and their supporters from teaching in public schools. That was happening just as *Word* was released, and I became interested in doing my next film on the contemporary context of being gay. While *Word* is about coming to terms with our own identities and overcoming what we had been taught to think about ourselves, I was interested in the Briggs Initiative's response to both sides of the issue. So in the wake of *Word*, I started developing a film idea about the Briggs campaign, which I worked on with Peter Adair. However, over the ensuing months, I became more drawn to Harvey Milk's story. He was brave and articulate and emerged as our standard bearer, and he really caught my attention. It was at that point that Peter essentially said to me, "Go fly off, young one," in the most supportive way possible. And then everything happened from there. Harvey Milk's story embodied the impulse for what I wanted to do with the Briggs campaign.

So while you were making the film, the assassinations occurred?

Yes, although I can't say I was very far into the making of the film. I did whatever I could to track what was going on, but I couldn't pull together a crew every time I needed one. More often I was out there with a little cassette recorder, and my friend, photographer

Dolores Neuman, would take stills. One key sequence from the film is actually from that material—the night of the victory over Proposition 6. Harvey's victory speech that night was recorded with just me standing there with a funky-ass cassette recorder. In the film, a climactic sequence is constructed with this recording and still photographs. We didn't have the film footage, but we had enough material after the assassinations to put together a sample reel to pitch the project. Then I received some grant money and Richard Schmeichen joined me as the producer. Richard actually moved out from New York for a year to produce the film with me. There are eight interview subjects, but they weren't filmed until '83 [due to funding issues]; the assassinations happened in '78, so those people told their story several years after the fact. This frustrated me at the time because I felt like it should be a *cinéma vérité* film, capturing the events as they were unfolding. But in the end, I think we reconstructed the story well enough. And I came to see it as a blessing that the film took so many years to make—having those intervening years allowed for a distillation of themes.

Talking-head interviews often get a bad rap, but I think many of those in *The Times of Harvey Milk* are quite amazing.

Now when I see it, occasionally when I'm asked to attend something, I think about the fact that these people are telling what happened so many years after the fact, and yet it is still so present for them. I'm always taken by that. We did a lot of pre-interviews during those intervening years [between '78 and '83], around 100 people, in order to cast those eight who made it into the film. To me it made sense to tell this story with fewer characters rather than a lot.

When I first saw *The Times of Harvey Milk*, it had a profound impact on me—I can't really put it into words. When you were making the film, did you have any sense of how epic the story was, or how it would affect people?

I certainly couldn't have. Who could have predicted how the film would be received and the fact that it still resonates for people? I knew that the filmmaking challenge was to find a way to give the events the emotional depth that I had experienced. If we could tell the story dramatically in a way that made the audience care for Harvey, feel saddened by his murder, and be outraged at the

subsequent injustice, then we would succeed. To a large degree we were also guided by a sense of restraint, which I think serves the film and the subject well. There's a certain catharsis in this kind of documentary work. I was trying to figure out a way to present to an audience what I've experienced or discovered, so that they too might have that experience and make their own discoveries. Having lived here, having gone through all of those events in the '70s, specifically the loss of Harvey Milk, all I knew was that this was a story that hadn't yet been told in a way that made sense to me. Randy Shilts' book [*The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*] and other books about Dan White and the trial told the story, but it wasn't told in any other medium. I think for most of the world it was a passing current-event story, on page whatever of most newspapers, and that was the end of it.

It is one of those films that doesn't feel like one is watching a documentary anymore because one gets so wrapped up in the characters and in Harvey's life and spirit.

Harvey's alive in the film, which is great. There wasn't much footage of Harvey, but I think between the storytellers and what we were able to find and present, he does live in the film.

I understand you experimented with the fundraising for the film.

Yes, we tried everything imaginable, short of hustling. First, we did a direct-mail campaign—probably the first film to ever do that—and that actually got us enough to keep going for a while. It also helped to create a sense of community around the film. We had work-in-progress screenings for donors. One-third of our funding came from individuals, something like 900 people, and their contributions ranged from one dollar to \$1,000, which really helped during the early years. All total, the film cost \$300,000. A big chunk of money came from WNET, a public television entity in New York, and the rest came from grants.

There have been a number of attempts at a dramatic version of the film; I think Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams both expressed interest in playing Milk, and Gus Van Sant was attached to it for a while, as was Oliver Stone. Do you know why the path to the dramatic version has been so torturous?

I don't. I can't speak for the decisions made by corporate Hollywood. For a while I tried to involve myself, feeling some kind of

proprietary interest and also knowing that the documentary was being used to introduce Hollywood executives to the story. More people were picking up the tape and sticking it into their VCR than picking up [Shilts'] book and reading it. But I was able to let go of that a long time ago and realize that it's going to be what it's going to be.

The film came out in 1984, just as the gay community was hit hard by the AIDS crisis. San Francisco seemed like the eye of the storm.

It was a devastating time. I remember walking into my doctor's office in the heart of the Castro district at around the time that *The Times of Harvey Milk* was coming out, and he told me that he was retiring. He said he couldn't face what was about to happen. "It's going to be like the lost city of Atlantis," he said. To a degree, he was right. The Castro during the '80s was a dark, dark place. Even if you didn't have friends who were sick and dying not very pretty deaths, you saw it on the street. You saw people walking around the street with Kaposi's sarcoma. It was a very evident disease and there was no escaping it. I think it's quite different now.

***The AIDS Show* [1986] captures this moment in history when the gay community was completely besieged by the virus.**

And we had no perspective on the enormity of the situation other than the immediate. It was 1986 and we had no idea where things were ultimately headed.

What was the impetus behind filming this stage production?

Peter Adair and I both felt compelled to do something on AIDS so we decided to pool our resources. Leland Moss, a respected theater director, had pulled together an ensemble of actors and writers to do a theater piece as kind of clarion call about the impending epidemic. [The stage play] *The AIDS Show* was an acronym for Artists Involved with Death and Survival. [The play] was the first creative endeavour Peter and I had seen on the subject, and it worked on several levels—as a harbinger and as entertainment. So it seemed like a valuable thing to document.

Then came *Common Threads* [1989]. It must have been very difficult documenting this disease when there was so little hope, no semi-miraculous drug cocktail.

The only hope was the hope that you found in community—as clichéd as that sounds. And that was one of the themes Jeffrey and I were hoping to express through the quilt. There was also a kind of hope in the bravery of these people individually. At that point I hadn't been touched by death that closely. If such a thing can be possible, I felt more prepared after doing that film to face the reality of dear friends and buddies dying, as well as my father's death.

Did the rest of America's reactions to what was going on in that community ever seem shocking?

America is always shocking. I'm shocked by how people other than those I know react to things. Man, I can't speak for the rest of America. But I guess in some way we were making *Common Threads* for the rest of America. It was produced for HBO, for a broad mainstream audience, so in that sense, we were aiming to get the rest of America to understand what was happening and to look at something they probably didn't want to look at. After the initial HBO broadcast, we received amazing mail from people. I think the film opened some eyes at that juncture.

***The Celluloid Closet* [1995] is a very interesting project because you were adapting a book. Can you talk a little bit about the complexities of adapting Vito Russo's book for the big screen?**

The biggest complexity is that we didn't have Vito—we didn't really get into the making of the film in earnest until after his death in 1990. So that was a great void, not having his vision. But he did leave us with a guiding philosophy, which was that he felt the film should be, above all, entertaining. He cited the series *That's Entertainment!* [a 1974 documentary that looks at various MGM stars and the history of the studio] as a model. He thought the *Celluloid* movie version of the book should be fun to watch, and that was something that we kept in mind. Some people criticized the film for not being political enough, as did one movie star who appears in the film. We went by Vito's directive, though. His book was political because it was his polemic. It's really Vito's voice that drives the book, but in the film it's another voice. The other big challenge was how to end the film. We were ending at a point in time where both society and movies were changing in some ways, while in other ways things were status quo. So how do you conclude *Celluloid* when the story is ongoing? That was a challenge. It was also a



Still from The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), courtesy Telling Pictures



Vito Russo with the panel he made for his lover Jeff Sevcik, from Common Threads (1989), courtesy Telling Pictures

difficult decision to focus only on Hollywood films and not include independent or non-American films. In the first cut, we included independent films and interviews with independent filmmakers. This might have worked if we structured the film as a documentary for television, but we had to narrow the focus for a narrative feature.

So really, you are talking about the studios versus gays.

At certain points we reference European film, but yes, we kept the focus on studio film.

I like the way you end it with a montage in which there are a lot of independent films.

It was meant to say that there are other voices making films outside of the studio system.

The film is like a sequel to Vito's book just because it is different from it.

I agree. Vito's book was written in the 1970s and we were making the film in the 1990s. He actually wrote a lot of that book in my apartment in San Francisco. He would often leave New York during the winters and come out and stay with me. When he was in LA, he stayed with Lily Tomlin.

I'm wondering how Lily Tomlin's reluctance to come out impacted you at the time *Celluloid* was coming out.

It was difficult because Armistead [Maupin, who co-wrote the film's screenplay and then distanced himself from the project because Lily Tomlin would not state that she was a lesbian] had his point of view, Lily had her point of view, and I had my point of view, but now that feels like a long time ago.

Did you think that Armistead had a point? It did seem strange that this movie, which is predicated on a book that criticized people for not being open, would have Tomlin so involved—and still closeted.

From Lily's point of view, she felt she was out. But if somebody wanted her to make a statement, then she would back away. You know, people make their own decisions. I don't believe there was a double standard. I also knew that the film wouldn't have been made without Lily. What more could we ask from her? She was so

important in getting that film made with HBO and I'll be grateful to her forever. And of course Armistead also made a great contribution by writing the narration.

When the film was at the Toronto International Film Festival, I asked Tomlin, "What led you to get involved in this?" But before she could answer, a fire alarm went off.

I remember, and I don't know if it was me or Jeffrey who said, "Saved by the bell."

You've been an out gay filmmaker since you were nineteen and have made numerous films on gay issues and topics. You live in California surrounded by a lot of those people whom Vito Russo chastised in his book for not being more honest and for being too conservative and duplicitous. Has that ever been awkward for you?

I don't live in Hollywood, I live in San Francisco, and the two are worlds apart. Nor do I work in Hollywood, so my world is a pretty independent one. I am connected to Hollywood as an Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] member and am involved in projects with people who live and work in Hollywood. So maybe I have a big toe in that other world, but not all of my anatomy. That is not my world.

What led you to *Paragraph 175* [2000]?

Jeffrey [Friedman] and I were in Amsterdam promoting *The Celluloid Closet*. We came back to our hotel and received a letter from a Dr Klaus Müller asking for a meeting. He mentioned that he worked with the Holocaust museum and that he was doing research on homosexual survivors who were persecuted during the Nazi Era. We met with Klaus, expecting some older professorial-type with bushy eyebrows, but in fact he was this young, hip guy in his thirties with cool eyewear. He was very articulate and passionate about the subject and he believed we were the filmmakers to make the film for an international audience. We left the meeting convinced that there was a film that needed to be made—and made quickly, as these men were old. Soon afterward, we had a meeting with Jackie Lawrence of UK Channel 4, which helped to fund *Celluloid*. Jackie immediately got the urgency and significance of the project, and gave us a bit of development money, which got us underway. Then we hooked up with Zero Films, a German

production company, as our co-producer, and eventually Sheila Nevins and HBO came on board in a bigger way. With Klaus's help, we met some of the survivors; there were seven, and five of them agreed to appear on camera. For most of them it was very difficult and painful to participate. On the day we were to film one survivor, he got nervous because he thought that his landlord was going to see a film crew and then start asking questions, so he reneged. These are men of a different generation who generally lived their lives with fear and shame. Heinz F.—he's probably the character that most people remember from the film—breaks down and cries at the end when he is asked, "Have you ever told anyone this story before?" and, "Would you have liked to?" And he says, "I would have liked to have been able to tell my father," and breaks down sobbing. At first, he had agreed to be filmed only in silhouette, but then when he looked at his image on the monitor he said, "It's too dark, you can't see me!" In the end, vanity won out and he agreed to have his image revealed—which we were thankful for because he is such a strong screen presence.

As a filmmaker, do you think your work contributes toward some sense of progress for gays and lesbians? There is still such homophobia and discrimination despite the work of filmmakers such as yourself.

It's frustrating. It feels like history just keeps repeating itself. On the other hand, I think that there are new generations growing up with a whole other worldview. They grow up with openly gay uncles, siblings, and parents. This is happening at the same time as other regressive things are happening. It feels like we're still arguing the same arguments and fighting the same fights. Like, didn't they see *Word Is Out* that was made back in 1977? In some way all that rhetoric out there has nothing to do with me, but then again it has everything to do with me. I have to keep making myself aware of what my work means for other people. But in terms of the responsibility that we take for our own lives, all that anti-gay rhetoric means nothing, and I think that's true for a lot of people. I think that is a great change. It doesn't mean that we can be complacent, not for a moment. On some level, you have to say about those people, the ones who refuse to educate themselves and insist on hating us, fuck 'em.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Ten Days That Unexpectedly Changed America: Gold Rush* (TV feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 2006
- An Evening with Eddie Gomez* (feature documentary) (director), 2005
- Underground Zero* ("Isaiah's Rap" segment, feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 2002
- Crime & Punishment* (TV series, various episodes) (director), 2002
- Paragraph 175* (feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 2000
- The Celluloid Closet* (feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 1995
- Where Are We? Our Trip Through America* (feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 1993
- Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* (feature documentary) (co-director with Jeffrey Friedman), 1989
- The AIDS Show* (TV short documentary) (co-director with Peter Adair), 1986
- The Times of Harvey Milk* (feature documentary) (director), 1984
- Word Is Out* (feature documentary) (co-director with several filmmakers), 1978