Celluloid Activist

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“Well, it’s about fuckin’ time!”

In the early stages of research for this book, I phoned playwright Doric Wilson for an interview. I had barely announced my intention to write a biography of Vito Russo when the above response came booming back through the receiver. Doric’s endorsement, though more bluntly phrased than most, was typical. For the past four years, I have been astounded by the generosity of people who had never heard of me but trusted me to tell the story of this beloved gay icon.

I never met Vito. But I was fascinated by him by the time I was seventeen. As a closeted and frightened freshman at American University, I spent innumerable hours in Bender Library, secretly researching my two favorite topics: homosexuality and film. In September 1987, The Celluloid Closet’s second edition arrived at Bender just as I did. Studying the book’s spine, I was savvy enough to understand the “closet” allusion, and Vito’s Italian names made me feel a kinship with him.

When I took the book off the shelf and saw the subtitle, Homosexuality in the Movies, stamped on its cover, I slid to the floor and spent the next several hours hypnotized. I’d had no idea of the damage that Hollywood had done to gays and lesbians. Some of the titles that Vito mentioned were familiar; most went right past me. That afternoon I received my first inkling that some gays not only liked themselves but fought like hell when insulted.

Three years later, as an out and proud senior, I opened a copy of the Washington Blade and felt a rush of tears sting my eyes. “Celluloid Closet author Vito Russo dies at 44.” It was like losing a favorite uncle.

Flash-forward fifteen years. At the 2005 Northeast Modern Language Association conference in Boston, Damion Clark chaired a panel on the Closet’s relevance to film studies today. I delivered a paper that I hoped might grow into a journal article.

Angling for a personal perspective on Vito and his work, I wrote a letter to Vito’s best friend, Arnie Kantrowitz, and Arnie’s partner, Larry Mass. Both men gave me hours of phone time and insight. Larry also gave me an inadvertent grail. “It’s nice that you’re writing an article on The Celluloid Closet, but somebody really should write a full biography of Vito.”

The notion seemed heaven-sent, but I was very nervous. Vito was a one-name phenomenon. He knew everyone in gay culture and politics. He numbered
Lily Tomlin and Bette Midler among his friends. He epitomized two generations of gay activism, from Stonewall through the first decade of AIDS. And he had any number of colleagues far more qualified and knowledgeable to write his story.

Trying to muster self-confidence, I applied for fellowships under the careful guidance of David Román and my dear friend Robert Gross. I then spent several months poring over Vito’s papers in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL), where Arnie had deposited them ten years earlier. (Yale wanted them, too. Bless Arnie for giving first dibs to the scholars of Vito’s favorite city.) There I received boundless help from head of manuscripts processing Melanie Yolles; reference archivists Laura Ruttum and Thomas Lannon; archivists Don Mennerich, Megan O’Shea, and Susan Waide; and technical assistant John Cordovez. These people know from primary sources, and they know how to advise in the friendliest, most efficient manner imaginable.

I am also indebted to Lodi Memorial Library’s Barbara Frank and Artie Maglionico, who introduced me to local history that brought Vito’s adolescence to vivid life. At Fairleigh Dickinson University, Okang McBride, director of Alumni Relations, and Professor Martin Green, chair of English, gave me detailed background on Vito’s undergraduate career. I must thank Suzanne Dmytrenko, university registrar of San Francisco State University, for shedding light on Jeff Sevcik’s training as a poet. I offer deep gratitude to Maxine Wolfe and Marwa Amer of Brooklyn’s Lesbian Herstory Archives, a peerless resource where I received my first glimpses of Our Time and the 1973 Gay Pride debacle.

Before digging deeply into Vito’s life, I never expected to learn much about his earliest education. His elementary-school days at Holy Rosary were nearly fifty years past, and his NYPL files contained no papers from his childhood. To my amazement, Holy Rosary (renamed Mt. Carmel-Holy Rosary School) still occupies the same Pleasant Avenue building that Vito knew. Principal Suzanne Kasynski and director of development Andrea Arce have been extremely generous with their time and assistance. Andrea even managed to locate Vito’s P.S. 80 kindergarten records. Her sleuthing skills are unmatched.

As I started sketching Vito’s childhood, I realized that I couldn’t proceed without the cooperation of the Russo family. Before meeting Charlie Russo, Vito’s closest living relative, I had heard that he wanted to write his own memoir about his brother. I was very nervous about approaching him. As a quick glance at my notes reveals, Charlie proved completely receptive to this project. He invited me to his home for dinner and long conversations with him and his lovely wife, Linda. He gave me unrestricted access to family photos, letters, school records, Vito’s baby book, Celluloid Closet rough drafts, and his own memories, the painful along with the exhilarating. He answered entirely too many e-mails containing my nitpicky queries about family history. He also paid me the highest
possible compliment during our first interview when, in the middle of a sentence, he broke off and remarked, “You know, looking at you is like looking at my brother.”

I wish I had space to thank individually each member of the Russo and Salerno clans. They all welcomed me as one of the family. Several, however, require particular mention. Vito’s eighty-eight-year-old aunt and godmother, Jean Tramontozzi, not only gave me reams of Salerno backstory unknown to younger relatives; she also treated me to a scrumptious Italian lunch the likes of which I hadn’t enjoyed since my grandmother died. Charlie’s oldest daughter, Vicki, photocopied and mailed to me the lengthy journal that Annie Russo kept after Vito’s death. Charles Russo Jr. met with me in San Francisco to pass on a wealth of his uncle’s personal papers, many of them untouched since Vito’s death. Vito’s cousin, Vin Tozzi, provided me with dozens of photos, videos, and written memories.

The extended family of Vito’s friends has been equally magnanimous. Without my having to ask, I received unpublished interviews of Vito conducted by Richard Berkowitz, Leslie Cohen, Esther Newton, and Nancy Stoller. Jay Blotcher and Don Shewey sent me private journal entries that they had written about Vito. Larry Mass dropped into my lap seven years’ worth of journals that he had not opened since writing them. A few months later, he donated the entire stash to NYPL—meaning that I got the first read. I’ll be forever grateful to Larry for his trust and kindness.

Other personal writings began flooding in. Howard Cruse, Dorian Hannaway, and Charles Silverstein shared unpublished memoirs that offered unique perspectives on Vito’s life and activism. Allen Sawyer lent me two volumes of Jeff Sevcik’s unpublished poetry, left to him by Vito. Lily Tomlin sent me several letters that Vito had written to her along with video of his “Celluloid Closet” lecture. (I also thank Lily for the two hours of uproarious interview she gave me—and I thank her assistant, Janice Frey, and John “Lypsinka” Epperson for helping me to contact Lily in the first place.) Vito’s physician, Ron Grossman, gave me several letters brimming with information on Vito’s battles with AIDS.

Stephen Conte, Robert Leuze, Rick Mechtly, and Charles Silver provided me with rare documents illuminating Vito’s career. James Cascaito and Stephen Soba wrote to me, respectively, about Vito’s participation within ACT UP and his Public Theatre presentations of “The Celluloid Closet.” Eileen Bowser put me in touch with Vito’s Museum of Modern Art colleagues. With extraordinary generosity, Michael Musto advertised my book on his Village Voice blog and urged anyone with Vito memories to contact me. I am indebted to Michael for information I could never otherwise have learned.

I conducted nearly two hundred interviews for this book. As with Vito’s family, I cannot honor all these people with individual mention. Everyone who
spoke with or wrote to me about Vito has my heartfelt thanks. But I must give explicit nods to several heroes, beginning with Vito’s surviving partners, Steve Krotz and Bill Johnson. Steve granted me untold hours of phone interview and a vivid description of Vito’s Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) days. Bill allowed me to spend several days in his Cleveland home, where I transcribed dozens of letters that Vito had sent him during their courtship. Bill and his assistant, Lorraine Cogan, made my trips to Ohio extraordinarily pleasant and productive.

Vito’s famous friends—New York state senator Tom Duane, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, Valerie Harper, Larry Kramer, Dean Pitchford, Howard Rosenman, Craig Zadan—were incredibly giving with their time, memories, and connections. Other friends provided carte blanche access to precious materials. Jay Blotcher lent me the entire run of Our Time on VHS, sparing me many tedious hours of transcription at NYPL. NYPL’s Kevin Winkler, an archive unto himself, gave me dozens of Vito’s Advocate articles and rare Bette Midler footage. Patrick Pacheco kindly lent me the run of After Dark issues on which Vito worked. Despite illness, Fred Goldhaber journeyed into Manhattan both to be interviewed and to give me a complete audio recording of Vito’s 1987 appearance with the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus. Hal Offen entrusted me with two overstuffed binders of GAA papers that are, in toto, an unrivaled overview of the early gay-rights movement in New York. Arthur Evans, Ron Goldberg, Jim Hubbard, and Tom Steele generously assisted me in the securing of permissions. Hugh Van Dusen and Cynthia Merman helped me to flesh out Vito’s interactions with Harper & Row.

As I was preparing to write the book, I received expert advice from Michael Denneny, Karla Jay, Eric Myers, Sarah Schulman, and Ed Sikov on the minefields of gay publishing. Eric was the first person to refer me to the University of Wisconsin Press, where this project has benefited from the impeccable stewardship of senior acquisitions editor Raphael Kadushin, his assistants Nicole Kvale and Katie Malchow, managing editor Adam Mehring, copyeditor Barb Wojhowski, copy chief Will Broadway, marketing intern Ellen Maddy, director Sheila Leary, and electronic publishing manager Krista Coulson. As Celluloid Activist’s peer reviewers, David Bergman and Anthony Slide provided invaluable commentary on the book’s focus and accuracy.

Without the help of Patrick Merla, this book would never have reached print. A ferociously intelligent editor, agent, and writer, Patrick advised me through several proposal drafts and contract negotiations. He provided these services for free, out of love for Vito and a belief in my abilities. I can never repay him.

Several colleagues at New York Institute of Technology deserve special thanks. Provost Richard Pizer and Dean Roger Yu granted me course release time and a year’s sabbatical so that I could focus on my research and writing.
Within the Manhattan English Department, I am especially grateful for the encouragement of my friends, chair Kathy Williams and professors Cathy Bernard and Jennifer Griffiths. Our tireless administrative assistant, Maggie Albright, has made my life easier every day for eight years.

My family has supported me in this project from the start. I thank my parents, Judy and Joe Schiavi, for always checking in on my progress, and my aunt and uncle, Clorine and Nino Patete, for tutoring me in the nuances of Italian ballads.

I save my deepest gratitude for three men at the center of my life. Chris Collette, my best friend, is a vital part of this book. Back in olden days, when we were a couple, Chris bought me my first copy of *The Celluloid Closet* as a birthday gift. Since then, he has listened to more rambling about Vito Russo than any human should have to endure. He has also provided unstinting technical support and reassuring back pats. If E. M. Forster’s Margaret Schlegel existed as a twenty-first-century gay man, she’d be Christopher William Collette.

My former partner, Scott Stoddart, is the kindest soul I know. In our ten years together, Scott helped me over countless personal and professional hurdles. His sage counsel saw me through this book’s drafting. During my sabbatical year, Scott fed me, printed my chapters, kept me in office supplies, listened patiently to my research and writing woes, and got me out of the house on days when I hadn’t budged from my computer since dawn. His love and encouragement made this project possible. (Special thanks also to Suzanne Richardson, Scott’s administrative assistant at Fashion Institute of Technology, for her kindness.)

And finally, the man to whom I dedicate *Celluloid Activist*: the incomparable Arnie Kantrowitz. Like Charlie Russo, Arnie had planned to write his own biography of Vito. Instead, he turned the project over to me without a backward glance. Like far too many gay men of his generation, Arnie has lost hundreds of friends and acquaintances to AIDS. But not once in our dozens of conversations did he flinch from a painful memory. He opened his mind, his heart, and his home to me. He lent me copies of Vito’s journals to facilitate my drafting. He also lent me twenty years’ worth of datebooks that kept a far more meticulous record of Vito’s life than Vito himself ever managed. Arnie embodies the term “mensch.” I love him and thank him from the bottom of my heart.

When I first contacted Arnie and Charlie about this book, I promised to do justice to the man who was a brother to them both. I hope they feel that I have kept my promise.

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