Celluloid Activist
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In May 2009, author and activist Jay Blotcher asked to interview me about this book. Along with Jeffrey Schwarz’s forthcoming documentary, *The Times of Vito Russo*, *Celluloid Activist* seemed to indicate a resurgence of interest in Vito’s life and legacy.

When Jay’s article appeared in *Pride ’09*, I was jolted to see “Who in the World Is Vito Russo?” plastered across the first page. The next time I spoke to Jay, he was furious. The title, he told me, had been imposed by *Pride*’s editor, who didn’t think that Vito’s name would be familiar to current readers. I conceded the point and went back to my manuscript, more determined than ever to fill that gap in history.

Vito Russo (1946–90) is the pioneering activist whose book, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981; rev. ed. 1987), almost single-handedly invented the field of gay and lesbian media studies. By documenting the hundreds of homicides, suicides, and stereotypes that typified filmed representation of homosexuals throughout the twentieth century, *The Celluloid Closet* taught gay readers that the bigotry they suffered offscreen correlated directly to the lies perpetuated about them onscreen. Never before had watching movies, the unofficial gay pastime, entailed such political urgency.

Both before and after *Closet*’s publication, Russo toured widely with a lecture presentation of his work, which introduced the notion of gay imaging to audiences in over two hundred colleges, universities, museums, and community centers throughout the United States as well as Canada, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Belgium, and Australia. During the 1970s and 1980s, Russo’s writing regularly reached thousands of readers in *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York*, the *Nation*, *Film Comment*, *Village Voice*, *Moviegoer*, *After Dark*, the *Advocate*, *New York Native*, *Soho Weekly News*, *GAY*, and London’s *Gay News*. 
But Russo’s influence stretched well beyond his lecturing and journalism on film. He was a principal shaper of post-Stonewall gay politics and AIDS activism. A New York City native, he witnessed the Stonewall riots in 1969 and was an early, prominent member of Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), the first organization to lobby city and state government for gay and lesbian rights. As chair of the GAA Arts Committee, Russo introduced the organization’s membership to the pleasures of film spectatorship far from the heckling they found in mainstream theaters. Many gays and lesbians who lacked the courage to claim their rights in public attended Russo’s phenomenally popular “Firehouse Flicks” and subsequently joined the gay liberation movement.

Russo’s political innovations continued into the 1980s, when he cofounded both the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). In late 1985, as AIDS hysteria and gay-bashing swept America, GLAAD became the first group exclusively committed to securing a balanced portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media. A little over a year later, Russo helped to channel ACT UP’s theatrical rage against a government that was criminally serene about the deaths of thousands of gay men, drug addicts, racial minorities, and women. As a person with AIDS and an ACT UP warrior, Russo delivered some of the epidemic’s angriest, most eloquent speeches against institutionalized neglect.

Writer and publisher Felice Picano proclaimed Russo “one of the epicenters of communication in the gay world.” By his early thirties, Russo had become an undisputed hero within the community. Friends who experienced the hagiography of Vito Russo up close depict his public persona as half matinee idol, half guru. Fellow AIDS activist Larry Kramer notes that “people worshiped [Russo]. To walk down the street with him was like being with a star. His fans rushed to him.” Arnie Kantrowitz, Russo’s best friend, remembers, “If you went out with Vito, you had to be prepared to stand on the sidelines while he greeted five hundred friends and acquaintances. . . . I felt like an adoring . . . First Lady [in his presence].” Kantrowitz also deems Russo a gay “Martin Luther King” during an era when gay people were starved for “stars” and role models. Kantrowitz’s partner, Dr. Larry Mass, ascribes to the public Russo “a magnetism that simply transformed people. . . . He had an inner light of personality that you just wanted to reflect on you and be a part of. When Vito gave one of his talks, there was so much love and affirmation exchanged between him and the audience. There are [such] moments when it’s just the artist and the audience. [The audience has] to know the artist is putting himself out there in some way. With Vito,” Mass avers, “I saw it all the time.”

Russo was also well known beyond the worlds of gay and AIDS politicking. At the dawn of gay liberation, he befriended Lily Tomlin, then a struggling comedienne on the verge of Laugh-In superstardom. This close relationship
endured for the rest of Russo’s life and culminated with Tomlin’s narrating Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman’s film version of *The Celluloid Closet* (1995). Bette Midler, catching fire at the Continental Baths in 1971, also became an early Russo buddy. During an era when most celebrities shunned the gay press, Russo’s friendships with Midler and Tomlin made possible his landmark *Advocate* interviews of them in 1975 and 1976.

Eventually, Russo would number among his friends actress Valerie Harper; composer Dean Pitchford; filmmakers Pedro Almodóvar, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jim Hubbard; film producers Howard Rosenman and Craig Zadan; former New York City mayor David Dinkins; current New York state senator Tom Duane; former Massachusetts state representative Elaine Noble (the first open lesbian in U.S. history to hold this office); playwrights Charles Busch and Doric Wilson; groundbreaking AIDS doctors Marcus Conant, Ron Grossman, and Howard Grossman; film critics Richard Dyer, David Ehrenstein, and Edward Guthmann; writers Dennis Altman, Arthur Bell, Malcolm Boyd, Christopher Bram, Michael Bronski, Larry Bush, Howard Cruse, Michael Denneny, Karla Jay, Brandon Judell, Jonathan Ned Katz, Armistead Maupin, Patrick Merla, Michael Musto, Esther Newton, Felice Picano, James Saslow, Sarah Schulman, Don Shewey, Ed Sikov, Mark Thompson, and Stuart Timmons—the majority of whom, along with 150 other Russo friends and fans, have lent their reminiscences to this book.

Perhaps the best indicator of Russo’s fame came near the end of his life, when Epstein and Friedman’s Oscar-winning documentary *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) featured Russo and gave him an international platform for his AIDS activism. While helping to publicize the film, Russo got to meet and work with Elizabeth Taylor. Their photo together has become an iconic image of Hollywood’s initial responses to AIDS. At the time, Russo’s friend Allen Sawyer related to an acquaintance that he had just spent time with Russo and Taylor. The acquaintance gasped, “You know Vito Russo?”

Russo’s is a representative voice for a generation of gay men who found sexual liberation in the 1970s followed by devastation and mature heroism in the 1980s. He was present for the defining moments of his era, many of which bear his stamp. Russo’s papers at New York Public Library include a prospectus for a memoir he had tentatively titled “An Activist Life.” It is one of AIDS’s countless tragedies that he did not survive to write his own life story, from liberation to loss to legacy.

For his contributions to post-Stonewall activism, for his unprecedented work on gays and lesbians in film, for his centrality to the worlds of gay politics and entertainment, for his galvanizing of AIDS activism with one of its first, and most persuasive, voices—a full-length biography of Vito Russo is long overdue.