Celluloid Activist
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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Schiavi, Michael.
Celluloid Activist: The Life and Times of Vito Russo.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/2496.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/2496
Electricity crackled beneath the Castro marquee. Six feet four inches tall and perched atop his ladder, Jeffrey Sevcik towered over Vito—indeed, over the entire street. His golden hair glinted in the afternoon light as he struggled, his hands full of slippery plastic letters, to maintain balance ten feet off the ground. He flashed Vito a grin before turning back to his work.

Heart hammering, Vito entered the theater. For the first time in weeks, his mind was not on tomorrow night’s lecture. Like the lovestruck Judy Garland flying over the trolley tracks in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, he remembered “how it feels when the universe reels.” Who could introduce him to that beautiful man?

Schmoozing in the Castro lobby after his lecture, Vito looked around for his new objet. No luck. He sought distraction by flirting with a buddy, photographer Rink Foto. Already taken, Rink disentangled himself from Vito’s grasp. Then as they stepped out into the street, Rink spotted the perfect diversion for his amorous friend. Still clad in the maroon and gold vest that served as his work uniform, Jeffrey was emerging from the theater. Rink turned Vito in Jeff’s direction, informed him that the “CT” embossed on his vest did not stand for “Cock Tease,” and introduced the two men.

Vito didn’t mind craning his neck to gaze into Jeff’s eyes. He rarely encountered this kind of lanky, towheaded beauty on Manhattan’s streets. Jeff seemed exotic to Vito, all the more so when he opened his mouth.

With no date for the festival’s opening-night party, Vito asked Jeff whether he was planning to attend, “hoping he would go just because [Vito] asked. ‘I don’t socialize[,]’ he said,” leaving Vito “crestfallen and fascinated.” Nevertheless, Jeff “shyly stayed near [him] afterward and came to the party[,] then to the hotel where they held each other until morning and [Vito’s] flight to L.A,” where Vito was to continue the Closet junket. Jeffrey accompanied him to the airport and left a romantic message for him at the Beverly Hills Hotel: “Been with
you all day; just wanted to call and say hello.” Less than a week later, Vito was preening that this “very lovely, quiet, special” guy was Manhattan bound.

Born April 10, 1955, Jeff was nearly nine years Vito’s junior. In a single year, he was the third significantly younger man who had made Vito reconsider romance. Now thirty-five, Vito paid no attention to men his own age.

Jeff hailed from a Pittsburgh family, the fourth of five children and the only boy. His father worked in a dairy in the suburb of McKees Rocks, while his mother stayed home with the kids until her youngest, Jeff’s sister Adele, started school. When their three older sisters grew up and relocated to Arizona, Colorado, and Delaware, Jeff and Adele were left alone with their parents.

Jeff got along beautifully with his mother, who, like Adele, shared his tastes in music and happily memorized Barbra Streisand albums with him. Mr. Sevcik was somewhat reserved with Jeff, disappointed that his extremely tall son had no interest in basketball—or any other sport, for that matter. Jeff was a strong student who excelled in French and English and, despite his shyness, loved acting in high school plays. Few McKees Rocks kids shared his love of Broadway musicals or old movies, so Jeff’s social circle remained small.

Jeffrey longed to leave Pittsburgh and follow the wandering example of his older sisters. But where to go and how to get there? Lacking his sisters’ sense of purpose and direction, he expressed his vague yearning in poetry:

Somebody come
And take me away from here
I can’t seem to do it by myself
Take me somewhere
I don’t care where
Just so it’s far from here
Let’s go west and take a rest . . .
I won’t imagine what it’ll be like
How we’ll do it
Or anything like that
I’m ready

Jeff’s unnamed western destination materialized at the continent’s far edge. In September 1973, he enrolled as a freshman at San Francisco State College (SFSC). At that point, he probably had not heard the nicknames (“Baghdad by the Bay,” “Sodom by the Sea”) assigned his new hometown during its early days. But it’s also unlikely that he would have moved over two thousand miles from home without some awareness of the booming gay population that had begun, through the colorful campaigns of Harvey Milk, to assert its political voice.
At eighteen, Jeffrey was no more political than he would become in adulthood. It was romantic connection that San Francisco promised the isolated aesthete,

A loner full of dreams   bitter hopes
And wanderlust. . . .
Perhaps I'll find
a loving heart there for me
Leftover love renewed

His new city also meant artistic and personal exploration. At SFSC, he took courses in acting, directing, film, dance, drawing, painting, rock and roll, and gay literature, a subject he could not have studied in the Pittsburgh of his adolescence. He also began penning volumes of poetry toward an interdisciplinary degree in Creative Arts. After thirteen rocky semesters, Jeff earned his bachelor’s degree in January 1980.

After graduation, Jeff had no particular goals save laboring over “an unfinished pyramid of poetry” that would eventually “become [his] tomb.” He was distracted by two film characters who reminded him, to a paralyzing degree, of himself: Geraldine Page’s immaculate, detached decorator in *Interiors* (1978) and Mary Tyler Moore’s immaculate, detached mother in *Ordinary People* (1980). Jeff related all too well to the perfectionism that blocked these women from closeness to others or from completing professional tasks that might bear telltale flaws. He agonized over finding *just* the right size basket for his mail slot and *just* the right color drain board for his dishes. Certainly he couldn’t send out poems that an editor might declare unpolished. And certainly he couldn’t take a demanding job that might expose him as a less-than-perfect worker. Instead, he nestled behind the Castro Theatre’s candy counter. The salary was negligible, but Jeff had already moved to elegant Upper Terrace with an older lover, Rick, who paid for their breathtaking view of the Bay Bridge. Working at the Castro gave Jeff endless access to free movies as well as the chance to exercise his creativity by hand lettering banners for upcoming features.

Jeff had plenty of fans in San Francisco. According to Rink Foto, the city’s myriad gay clerks and waiters deemed Jeff “the light of their lives.” To his Castro coworker Mary Rose Kent, being with Jeff “was like stepping into the sunlight.” She was charmed by his gentle sweetness and touched when, after having known her for some time, he bashfully announced, “I really like you. Can we be friends?” She thought they already were but accepted eagerly, happy to discuss the poetry of Denise Levertov and Diane Wakoski with him. Jeff’s Castro boss and former SFSC classmate, Allen Sawyer, was enchanted by his otherworldliness, which reminded him in equal measure of Peter Pan and Eliza Doolittle.
Allen, like many gay men, was strangely attracted to a guy who “didn’t emanate a sexuality.” To Allen, Jeff “was not a sexual person, but there was something very innocent—you almost wanted to mother him, really. Everyone who met him fell in love with him.” Laughing, Allen remarks, “I think all of us tried to be his boyfriend, but none of us succeeded.” Except Rick. And then Vito.

Three weeks after their introduction, Jeff arrived in New York just in time for Vito’s birthday. When Jeff pronounced himself “good for” Vito, Vito took notice. A couple weeks later, back from raucous book signings in Washington, Boston, and Chicago, Vito retreated with Jeff to Fire Island, where they spent delirious nights making love on the beach. Vito melted over this young man whose long, tanned body was as delicious as his encyclopedic knowledge of all Academy Award winners and his ability to recite with Vito, verbatim, the final scene from Two for the Road. Affectionate nicknames quickly sprang up. Vito became “V” or Jeff’s “Marlboro Man”; the tall, skinny Jeff was “Asparagus” or “Choppers” for his beautiful teeth. On the sand, Jeffrey told Vito that he loved him and wanted to be his man.

In San Francisco, Jeff’s friends began to realize that his feelings for Vito would be luring him away to a hyper city that seemed so inappropriate for someone of his sweet reserve. Misgivings were inevitable. Mary Rose, for instance, wondered how someone so ingenuous could survive in New York. But everyone donned smiles for Jeff’s sake. Allen even donated his apartment so that the new couple could experience Jeff’s favorite movie, The Member of the Wedding (1952), in honeymoon hush. For Vito, the highlight of this Carson McCullers adaptation was Ethel Waters’s haunting a cappella rendition of “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” Jeff was transfixed by Julie Harris’s performance as restless, lonely tomboy Frankie Addams, who shared his sense of not fitting in anywhere.

Vito recognized Jeffrey’s aimlessness but tried to ignore it. That summer, with the entire world celebrating Prince Charles and Lady Di, improbable love was in the air. So what if Jeff, at twenty-six, seemed like “a kid in a lot of ways” and had no idea how to jumpstart his life? So what if he confessed that while he enjoyed visiting Vito in New York, he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to live there? Such obstacles were made to surmount, and Vito made sure that Jeff saw Manhattan at its most glamorous. Jeff swooned on spotting Geraldine Page, who lived two blocks south of Vito, in a local vegetable store, and Jeff and Vito both screamed in a club upon meeting, through one of Vito’s many cabaret connections, Lena Horne and Hedy Lamarr. Vito took Jeff to a press screening of Ragtime (1981), adapted from E. L. Doctorow’s best seller and featuring the breakout performance of Elizabeth McGovern as Evelyn Nesbit. A few days later, they were chatting up the new star on a Village street.

Jeff realized that these moments were impossible in San Francisco. They, like Vito, could be found only in New York. He prepared to tell Rick that their
relationship was over. Vito, meanwhile, squelched all hesitation: “Jeffrey Sevcik is the man I love. No adjectives to describe the time we’ve had—thrown away the world and fallen in love with each other. A new feeling hardly describes what this is—he’s everything I ever wanted—told him so and he loves me loves me loves me loves me. . . . [It’s] hardly possible to believe I’m this gone but I am.” On August 31, two months after their meeting, Jeffrey moved to New York and in with Vito.

Everything began smoothly as Jeff jumped into Russo family doings. For Halloween he and Vito painted themselves in elaborate clown makeup and invited Vito’s young nieces, Vicki and Leslie, to join them for the annual Greenwich Village parade. The girls, who loved spending time in the city with Uncle Vito, got to meet a celebrity. The famous price tag dangling from her hat, Hee Haw’s Minnie Pearl had the drag queens abuzz. Vito yanked his charges up to the yahoo diva and commenced introductions. Pearl was no Page, but she was still a star, and Jeff shared his new nieces’ excitement.

At thirteen, Vicki realized that her uncle’s attraction to Jeff stemmed from Jeff’s seeming “like a big kid.” Lacking his lover’s years of activism and authorial struggle, Jeff provided Vito with a welcome retreat from adult cares. Vicki felt that, buried under his glib Manhattan cynicism, Vito had a “great childlike outlook on life—[a belief] that everything would be OK and there were no boogey-men in the closet and everyone loved each other. Jeff was still very much that way.” Vito echoed Vicki’s opinion, perceiving in Jeff “the kind of person [he] was when [he] was a teenager, but [Jeff] still had that childlike teenage innocence.”

For a time, Vito found Jeff’s innocence winning. But insecurities soon flared. After a month of cohabitation, Vito fretted that he was making things “almost impossible for [Jeff] by seeming to want him too much, to know his thoughts.” He reflected in his journal, “[I seem to] always be afraid he isn’t liking it here, liking me—a afraid that it isn’t ‘working’ and afraid of outside things. I want to let him go—to let him be Jeffrey—and still be his partner in life. I hope that is possible. I love him so much.” Vito didn’t specify the “outside things” worrying him, but Jeff’s lack of professional drive surely numbered high among them. Six weeks into their shared life, Vito admitted that his new lover had “little or no ambition to do anything but work part time and get by.” He gingerly qualified his misgivings: “That’s not a situation I can live with but I’m willing to give it time to change. How much time I’m not sure.”

Vito felt momentarily reassured when Jeff, through the help of Vito’s journalist friend Brandon Judell, took a job at Rockshots, a gay greeting-card warehouse in Chelsea. But from day one, Jeff felt grossly misplaced amid the company’s near-pornographic inventory. When Rockshots’ owners threw a party at Studio 54, he showed up in a nerdy bowtie. And he hated the work itself. Colleague Natalie Lessinger shudders over the “huge, filthy, and non-ventilated” room where they packed boxes with merchandise. Jeff was driven mad by regular
radio announcements of the time, which seemed to pass all the more slowly for being so relentlessly tolled. He rebounded when Natalie brought in tapes of Aretha Franklin and his beloved Van Morrison, but his cheer didn’t last.

Matters at home weren’t helping. Friend Wesley Greenbaum was distressed to see the transplanted San Franciscan frequently arrive at work in tears. Jeff tried to write off his crying as “just one of these things” he did, but he was in obvious pain. Despite Vito’s resolve to give Jeff copious space, by December he couldn’t refrain from lashing out. He didn’t know what to do with a lover who didn’t “make or see friends, [didn’t] go out much, [wouldn’t] get involved in the apartment except to keep it clean, [didn’t] like his job at Rockshots and [didn’t] seem interested in getting anything else although neither of [them had] any money.” Vito reluctantly admitted, “I don’t see how such a situation can continue.” For his part, Jeff couldn’t understand why Vito didn’t appreciate what he had: the perfect househusband. To say that Jeff kept their home “clean” was a sorry understatement. The boxes underneath the kitchen sink were perfectly aligned; the sink itself contained not a drop of excess water. Vito became a somewhat unwelcome intruder in his own apartment. One evening after Jeff had scoured the kitchen from floor to ceiling, Vito tried to get a late-night snack. Jeff blocked the doorway, intoning, “The kitchen is closed.” Exasperated, Vito barked back, “A clean house is nice, but it’s not the meaning of life!” He was relieved when Rick called, offering Jeff a trip to Hawaii over Christmas. Vito urged him to accept and return temporarily to San Francisco, where he could ponder his next move. They needed time apart.

Vito didn’t have time to babysit an insecure lover. The publication of his book marked a “time of major change” in his life. On a flight to Dallas, Vito was tickled to turn in his seat and discover a fellow passenger deep in the Closet. Friends reported that bookstores were regularly selling out their stock. After listing the book as its top seller in mid-July, Harper & Row ordered a second printing for October. US magazine published a lengthy excerpt from the last chapter, “Struggle.” But Vito noted with some irritation that the major New York papers were ignoring his work. The Times wouldn’t print the word “gay” outside quotation marks until 1987; certainly it wouldn’t deign to review a book based so squarely on progay politics. Vito ended up in its august pages by accident.

In celebration of Gay Pride 1981, Armistead Maupin wrote a whimsical op-ed piece that cited Vito as a gay expert on Stonewall and Judy Garland. Stop the presses! Times editors informed Maupin “in no uncertain terms that [he] couldn’t call [Vito] ‘gay.’” He recounts, “I pointed out that he was a well-known activist, that he was openly gay; that he’d actually written a book that was written from that standpoint. They said that didn’t matter; they had libel laws to consider and I would have to get an affidavit from Vito to claim himself queer.” Maupin called Vito, who raced up to the Times offices and gleefully proclaimed his homosexuality for his hometown’s paper of record.
With his sudden visibility, Vito was amused to become “something of a catch” and reminded himself to “enjoy it while it last[ed].” But his new fame also robbed him of privacy and put him on an unwanted pedestal. Prior to the book’s publication, Vito had prized the anonymity of being a writer. Now he found himself “whispered about in bars and at the baths.” Men pointed him out on the streets and, as Lily had warned him from her own experience, approached him seeking wisdom he didn’t have. For the first time, he got an unlisted telephone number.

Of course, fame also had its perks, not the least of which were financial. In a single week at the end of June 1981, Vito earned five thousand dollars, by far the most money he had ever received at one time. With new fortune came a desire to upgrade his image. He was tired of the dirt-poor “radical chic” look he had sported in furnishings and clothes since college. His apartment underwent months of noisy renovations. Vito’s father dutifully shuttled in from Lodi to build Vito his first closet for his ever-expanding film library. Contractors began demolishing the kitchen and bathroom, leaving Vito with a bathtub in the living room and no shower. But the end result justified the chaos. Vito loved the spotless white, gray, and sky blue apartment that he alternately likened to “a Dior perfume box” and “the animation sequences from Mary Poppins.” To keep things a bit off-kilter, he splattered Pollock-style paint splotches across his newly finished floors.

The man responsible for all this upheaval was celebrated fashion designer Clovis Ruffin. In the summer of 1979, Vito had enjoyed a quick affair with Clovis that sent his self-esteem into a tailspin. With his dark blond hair, cool blue eyes, and lean physique, Clovis had beauty to burn. He also had two other attributes that Vito found perversely fascinating: wealth and fame. While still in his twenties, Clovis had begun designing casual, T-shirt-style dresses for young professional women. The look took off and netted him enough money for a tower apartment in the magnificent Ansonia Hotel. Soon afterward, he moved to a penthouse in Abingdon Square, much closer to the gay action.

Clovis traveled in exalted, A-list circles that Vito glimpsed only through Lily Tomlin or Craig Zadan, both of whom had long since decamped to LA. Despite his scorn for the Pines/Studio 54 circuit, Vito wasn’t averse to exploring this world on Clovis’s splendidly attired arm. As he confessed in his journal, “I never wanted to be rich in my life until I met Clovis Ruffin.” Attracted to Clovis’s looks, prodigious knowledge of film, and artistic “genius,” Vito lamented not fitting the image of Clovis’s ideal lover, some gorgeous “extra from Hollywood Blvd” who wouldn’t challenge Clovis’s own sense of superiority. While agreeing with Bill Johnson that he and Clovis were “the mismatch of the century,” Vito couldn’t deny that the designer had much to teach him about fashion. “I’d let him change my wardrobe,” Vito resolved, “but not my values.”

Clovis went to work on Vito’s wardrobe. After spending much of the seventies in jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, and an awful rabbit-skin coat, Vito learned from
Clovis “how to dress with a kind of elegant touch, simple but smart, like a grown up.” A camel coat, slacks, button-down shirts, and loafers came to typify his eighties style. Vito was delighted with his new look, but it didn’t take him long to recognize Clovis’s shortcomings. In Andrew Holleran’s story “The Penthouse,” Clovis’s alter ego, Ashley, is a bullying host with a voice “as hard and flat as a frying pan he had just used to hit you over the head. (‘Next to Ashley,’ someone said, ‘Thelma Ritter sang bel canto.’)” Ashley endears himself with such pronouncements as “I’ve got money, looks, fame, and a big cock. Who can have sex with me?” But he earns partial redemption by deferring to Victor, “the author of a book on Hollywood’s treatment of homosexuals,” on the subject of film.

Vito’s friends were less than taken by Clovis. Baby Jane Dexter appreciated his fondness for Vito but found him “snobby and cruel,” given to ridiculing others “in a queeny, nasty way.” Felice Picano, who considered Clovis “a monster hidden inside the body and face of a beautiful man,” agrees. He was present one afternoon in the Pines when Clovis greeted a friend who’d recently put on a few pounds with “I see you’re modeling clothes for the larger woman these days.” Arnie, whose opinion Vito valued above all others, thought Clovis repulsive. Despite his close friendship with Vito’s Islanders Club colleague Eddie Rosenberg, Clovis never missed an opportunity to crack Jewish jokes. For Vito’s sake, Arnie let them pass as long as he could. Finally he exploded, telling Clovis he’d prefer not to see him rather than suffer any more of his “anti-Semitic shit.” Though Clovis and Arnie never spoke again, Vito maintained a tenuous friendship with the designer.

Yet he tired of Clovis’s constant pushing him to “do something” with his life. As the Closet neared publication, Clovis berated Vito for publishing his first book at thirty-four. To Vito’s protests that some people achieved fame only after death, if at all, Clovis retorted, “Don’t hand me that bullshit. I don’t want to hear anything about great people who get famous after they’re dead. . . . It’s better for you to have a column like Liz Smith for ten years than to be famous twenty years after you’re dead.” The remark stung, but Vito also realized that Clovis was jealous of his new stature in the gay community.

While still lecturing on the college circuit, Vito had started speaking in some impressive Manhattan venues. He was flattered when the Violet Quill Club, whose members included Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, and Robert Ferro, invited him to read two chapters of the Closet at their final meeting. On that evening, White read from his forthcoming novel A Boy’s Own Story (1982), placing Vito’s work in very distinguished company. According to Felice, Quill members didn’t open their meetings to guests; when they decided to do so, Vito was the only candidate on whom they all agreed.

The following year, Vito joined White, Arthur Bell, Kate Millett, Jim Fouratt, journalist Jeff Weinstein, and novelist Bertha Harris on a panel at 5th Avenue’s
New Museum, where speakers were asked to address the question, “What is the impact of homosexual sensibility on contemporary culture?” Weinstein dropped a zinger that Vito would quote for the rest of his life—“No, there is no such thing as a gay sensibility and yes, it has an enormous impact on our culture”—but Vito earned the evening’s biggest laugh when he referenced Arthur’s recent cocktails with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton (“Now that’s gay sensibility.”). Turning serious, he defined “gay sensibility” as gay spectators’ “nostalgia for something they have never seen before—themselves on screen.” At the evening’s close, a young woman from New Zealand rose to address the panelists: “I just want to say that as a young gay person—I was born in 1960—I owe a lot to you lot, and when Vito Russo [asked] why did you all come here tonight, part of the reason is you—because when I was growing up sexually, I had Kate Millett, and I had Vito Russo, and I had Bertha Harris, and I’d just like to acknowledge that, and say—thank you. I think there has been a lot of progress in the development of gay sensibility, and I think it has a lot to do with you here.”

Vito was also courted by major Manhattan theaters. In October 1981, he delivered the “Closet” at the Upper West Side’s Beacon Theater—one of the grand old movie palaces he had haunted as a kid with Perky. The following spring, the 8th Street Playhouse, a popular West Village revival house, invited Vito to kick off a six-week gay pride festival for which his opening-night lecture introduced the screenings of over sixty films discussed in the Closet.

Vito donated the Beacon lecture as a well-received benefit for the Gay Press Association. Not all his efforts at fund-raising were so successful. In 1982, Rob Epstein was seeking support for his film on Senator John Briggs’s Proposition 6 (which sought to ban gay teachers from California public schools) and on Harvey Milk. Since Vito had proven so helpful with Word Is Out, Rob asked him to assist with this latest project. Vito had the perfect idea, one he’d mulled over during times of financial trouble for the past two years: why not charge to screen his film of Bette Midler at the baths? He told Rob he’d be glad to help out.

When Midler got wind of the benefit, she was furious. Not only had she not given Vito permission to exploit her image, but the Continental footage showed her mooning her audience. Now a major star with a Grammy, a Tony, and an Oscar nomination to her credit, she wanted to divorce herself from those long-ago high jinks. Midler’s lawyer informed Vito that she would sue him if he went ahead with the screening. Though determined not to relinquish the film, Vito agreed not to show it in public. He also tried to put a positive spin on the situation for disappointed fans. “I don’t want anyone to get the idea that [Midler]’s being nasty to the gay community,” Vito insisted. She had every right to determine where and how her image was shown.

This stab at diplomacy barely masked his outrage. Why couldn’t Midler authorize a benefit screening for gay fans who remained loyal to her long after she
had abandoned them? And this wasn’t Vito’s first run-in with the diva. In 1975, they engaged in a screaming match that nearly brought the police. At a party, Vito criticized one of Midler’s friends, a “famous male singer,” for staying in the closet. Bette bellowed back, “After singing in shithole towns all across the country and busting his ass to be a success, why should he come out and throw it all away for your cause?” Vito “quietly reminded her that [gay pride] was [the singer’s] cause too, even if he didn’t know it, and dropped the subject.” Thereafter, Midler and Vito lost touch. Her threat of legal action was their first communication in nearly seven years.

In contrast, Vito’s friendship with Lily Tomlin thrived. In 1979, she offered to pay him for a treatment of *Wicked Woman* (1953), a remake she was planning of the B noir classic. Nothing came of this plan. He was buried in *Closet* drafting, while she was busy making *9 to 5* (1980) and *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (1981). But when *Esquire Film Quarterly* commissioned him to write a story on the filming of *Making Love* (1982), Lily once again invited him to stay in her Los Feliz mansion.

Vito arrived in Los Angeles the night before the 1981 Academy Awards. This year’s ceremony held strong personal interest for him beyond the usual hoopla. Lily was scheduled to present an award, and Vito’s friend Dean Pitchford was nominated in the Best Original Song category for his lyrics to “Fame.” On the morning of the show, Lily served Vito breakfast in her solarium while they watched trashy late-morning TV. Suddenly a special news bulletin burst on the screen: Ronald Reagan had just been shot in Washington, DC. Though no fan of the president, Vito was horrified over his “poor, sick, battered country” and its ceaseless insistence on “killing and killing.” The Oscar telecast was postponed one day.

As usual, Hollywood lifted Vito’s spirits. Dean won the Oscar, and the morning after the show, Vito reported to The CowBoy, a country and western bar where *Love* director Arthur Hiller was readying an early scene. Vito had mixed feelings about this project. On one hand, the story of a successful doctor (Michael Ontkean) who leaves his wife (Kate Jackson) for another man (Harry Hamlin) was a Hollywood first—as was the sight of two sexy, shirtless leading men enjoying an open-mouthed kiss in close-up. On the other hand, Arthur Bell had already read the script and pronounced it “so inoffensive that it’s offensive.” The characters were all extremely attractive, understanding, and liberal to a fault. Claire, the abandoned wife, has a sun-washed reunion with her ex before he returns to the drop-dead 5th Avenue aerie that he shares with his handsome lover. Vito snickered, “If everything goes as planned, *Making Love* may well become the *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* [1967] of gay rights.” That wasn’t necessarily a good thing. *Dinner* had attracted plenty of criticism for offering an impossibly placid look at interracial marriage. Fifteen years later, would *Making Love* prove more daring for gays?
Skepticism aside, Vito was very impressed by the courage of Love’s screenwriter, Barry Sandler, who was using this film as his professional coming out after penning one critically savaged biopic (Gable and Lombard [1976]) and one medium Agatha Christie adaptation (The Mirror Crack’d [1980]). As the only openly gay member of Love’s production team, Barry had considerable investment in the project. He confessed to Vito that he had been “very afraid for a long time to write this movie. . . . It meant exposing a lot of nerves.” His was the kind of all-for-honesty ethic that Vito treasured.

Well aware of Vito’s reputation, Sandler was thrilled to introduce him on the set, where cast and crew “had a sense that this film was a breakthrough, that there was historic significance to the film, that it was the first film made that dealt positively with the subject. So [Sandler thought] everybody felt that they were doing something more than just making a movie.” Vito got this impression from the actors and director. At the Mother Lode, a Hollywood gay bar used for a crucial scene in the film, extras were overjoyed to be appearing in a gay movie with a happy ending. Director Hiller, Vito reported, was “very sweet,” as was Kate Jackson. Playing the beefcake novelist who leads Michael Ontkean astray, Harry Hamlin dazzled Vito with his beauty (“bigger tits than Jane Russell,” Vito panted) and his no-nonsense professionalism. The straight actor had been jittery over his love scene with Ontkean until declaring, “Oh, fuck, this is what I’ve got to do, and if audiences don’t like it, screw them.” He attacked the scene with both lips and gave Vito great copy.

The Esquire feature also gave Vito visibility in mainstream journalism. Moviegoer magazine, distributed free in theaters nationwide, took notice and assigned him to an array of celebrity interviews. Offered one thousand dollars to profile British newcomer Rachel Ward, Vito bit hard. The money, he enthused, would mean “900 more than I have at the moment.” He settled in to Moviegoer-style gush, an updating of the Modern Screen prose rampant during his youth. Of the starlet, he burbled, “Some people are born with a personal letter from the Great Casting Agent in the Sky, and Rachel Ward’s one of them. She tried on the glass slipper and it fit the very first time around.” Intellectually he was on autopilot, but the pay was irresistible. Plus he got to meet some fascinating people.

David Bowie impressed Vito by breaking appointments to speak with him and by seeming “not at all as I expected—handsome, quiet, charming, British, well read and sincere.” Jessica Lange, achieving major stardom with her performances in Frances and Tootsie (both 1982), jolted Vito with her total nonchalance over being the unwed mother of Mikhail Baryshnikov’s daughter. Moviegoer allowed him a brief underground foray with a profile of Anne Carlisle, star of the indie smash Liquid Sky (1983)—a heavily lesbian- and gay-themed sci-fi romp that Vito inexplicably omitted from the revised Celluloid Closet—but for the most part, his assignments reflected the vanilla tastes of Moviegoer’s readership.
After a lifetime of Hollywood worship, Vito was distinctly unimpressed by celebrity histrionics. Thinking Nastassja Kinski an “asshole” for “fucking up [their] follow-up interview,” he took great glee in painting her as a pretentious ditz, ostentatiously flaunting a copy of Rimbaud at their breakfast interview while sloshing orange juice over her oatmeal. He also used an occasional interview to settle old scores, as when he goaded Angela Lansbury into defending her long-ago refusal of the lesbian lead in The Killing of Sister George.

Vito’s toughest interviews were of closeted celebrities. At the New Museum, he had gone out of his way to protect Lily when Jim Fouratt disingenuously asked, “Why doesn’t Lily Tomlin come out—if she’s gay?” A year later, profiling Lily for Moviovoer, Vito omitted any reference to her sexuality. In 1986, recycling substantial chunks of this interview in an Advocate profile, he maintained an uneasy distance from the truth. He quotes Lily on living with Jane Wagner, her partner of fifteen years, but the piece’s most significant references to gayness are to Hollywood AIDS panic and characters in Lily’s new Broadway show, The Search for Intelligent Signs of Life in the Universe. In limp self-justification, Vito hazards, “I hate it when a writer gets too cozy with a subject.”

This was a case of the lady protesting too much. Vito’s livelihood depended on his ability to cozy up to celebrities, though they often didn’t grant him the chance. Film mogul Allan Carr, four years after shrieking over Vito’s camera at a gay Mykonos club, kept his interviewer at arm’s length. Though using the Advocate to publicize his new Broadway show, La Cage aux Folles (1984), Carr remained resolutely mum on his sexuality, demurring, “People can think whatever they like about me.” Vito was forced into some riotous indirection, noting the extreme B-move decor of Carr’s Hollywood mansion (featuring rooms named, in pink neon, after stars of obscure Egyptian epics) and quoting his insistence on “maintaining the illusion” of celebrities’ private lives.

As usual, Vito writhed when faced with “the LA mentality” on “success, people, appointments, living style, friendship, etc.” But in the fall of 1982, as Closet sales reached thirty-five thousand and the book went into its fourth printing, Vito was happy to head west and collect the first of the many awards coming his way. On October 4, the Alliance for Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry (AGA) honored him with a special prize at its second annual Media Awards ceremony. One of his fellow honorees was Robert Preston, who told Vito that The Celluloid Closet had been indispensable as he prepared his role of Toddy, Julie Andrews’s gay mentor, in Victor/Victoria (1982). Before a starry gathering that included presenters Patty Duke Astin, Ned Beatty, Linda Lavin, Bernadette Peters, Lynn Redgrave, and Barry Sandler, Vito accepted his award from Zelda Rubinstein, the pint-sized psychic from Poltergeist (1982). He scored a laugh when he thanked the crowd for delivering him from his more typical speaking engagements: “Usually I’m sitting in New York and the phone rings and someone
wants me to take a Greyhound bus to Schenectady in February to be on a talk show where the host hasn’t read my book but would love to know what two men do in bed.” He then praised AGA for foregrounding the word “gay” in its title and named as one of his pet peeves seeing “some person on a TV talk show saying to the majority, moral or otherwise, ‘Please accept us because, after all, we’re just like you.’” Vito continued, “I think what needs to be said is ‘Grow up!’ . . . We’re not all the same, and we should teach people to see the beauty in difference, to appreciate it without trying to change everyone into an acceptable norm.” He concluded with a power jab at closeted actors: “In the words of Rita Mae Brown, ‘I’ve heard all the excuses, honey, and they’re all shit.’” The applause was thunderous.

Two weeks later, Vito brought the same brashness to the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund’s seventh annual awards dinner at New York’s Sheraton Centre. Honored alongside Washington mayor Marion Barry, Vito gloved to receive his award from Arnie. But the upscale, sixty-five-dollars-per-plate audience didn’t care for Vito’s insistence that gay people were not just like everyone else. Lambda’s gay lawyers and politicos prided themselves on their hard-won mainstream respect. So when Vito remarked, “If there were no difference [between gays and straights], there wouldn’t be a problem,” much of the room glared back in steely silence.

This wasn’t a reaction that Vito often encountered from audiences. He was far more used to the ovation that greeted him in June 1983 at the Stonewall Awards. Nominated in the category of Best Male Writer, Vito had formidable competition from Dennis Altman, Jonathan Katz, and Edmund White. When he was named the winner, he bolted to the Beacon stage, a white carnation tucked behind one ear, and exclaimed, “Shit! I didn’t think I’d win; I would have worn a dress.”

Offstage Vito was feeling much less jocular. He chastised himself for “basking in old glory” when he should be moving on to some new project. Since finishing the Closet, his most significant noncelebrity journalism had been an outrageous Village Voice spoof asking, “Why Is Leather Like Ethel Merman?” and a cranky diatribe for the Native explaining “Why I’m Not Marching” in the 1983 Pride festivities. (He wanted nothing to do with Christopher Street’s “dreadful street festival,” where bigoted merchants sold calzones and pastries “to a bunch of people out of whom under any other circumstances they would like to beat the living shit.”)

More-substantial writing ventures weren’t panning out. Given the popularity of his Moviegoer profiles and the Closet’s brisk sales, Vito considered himself an ideal celebrity biographer. But Gary Carey beat him to Judy Holliday, and he couldn’t interest anyone in a book on James Whale. He then tried to scare up interest in an unauthorized biography of Paulette Goddard. To Jed Mattes he
promised a book “which would move easily beyond ‘star talk’”; Goddard was, he argued, “one of the few living movie stars whose personal life is surrounded almost completely by mystery and glamour.” To Felice Picano, he raved about Goddard as a Queens scrapper who overcame poverty by cheerfully sleeping her way to the top. Harper & Row agreed that Goddard’s life was marketable but only in the hands of a different author. Vito groaned that he was tired of “auditioning again — now [he knew] why it was such a big deal when Crawford had to test for Mildred Pierce after all those years.”

He did nail one audition that mattered to him deeply. His old GAA buddy Doric Wilson had dramatized the Stonewall riots in a new play for The Other Side of Silence (TOSOS), the gay theater company that he had founded in 1974. Set on the eve of Stonewall, Street Theater assembled a group of drag queens, tough dykes, leathermen, closet cases, and the characters of Michael and Donald, Freudian casualties from The Boys in the Band. Vito landed the part of Jordan, an initially closeted student radical who flaunts “a spectrum of buttons advocating every political cause except his own.” The fact that Clovis Ruffin, confidently “trying on berets and carrying Stanislavsky around,” went uncast was icing on the cake. Vito was surrounded by actors who had, in Doric’s phrasing, “Gay Lib or underground theater credentials up the bunghole.” Other cast members included Harvey Perr, who had written the highly lauded lesbian teleplay The War Widow (1976), and Billy Blackwell and Michael Bowers, the “Billie and Tiffany” drag duo who prompted inadvertent rioting at the 1973 Pride Gala. Street Theater’s wigs were the creation of drag legend Ethyl Eichelberger. Vito was in vivid company.

He took the venture entirely tongue-in-cheek. For his program bio, he identified himself as a “native New Yorker who was kidnapped from a cabbage patch as an infant by loving heterosexuals. After being raised in an alien environment for eighteen years, he managed to escape and was found, washed ashore in Cherry Grove, by two radicalesbians who raised him as their own. . . . He likes Tom Waits and Checker Cabs. He hates soft boiled eggs, disco music, and organized religion.” When Street Theater opened in November 1982 at the Basement Theatre, Vito received good notices (the Native dubbed his performance “charming”) and enjoyed himself during the five-week run. Artistically, however, he deemed the play a “disaster” — an assessment seconded by Doric. Director J. Kevin Hanlon, who had wanted to cast Taylor Mead and other Warhol regulars, resented the Stonewall-savvy actors on whom the playwright insisted. Anarchy ensued. The Native carped that even “the most basic amenities of blocking and interpretation were in woefully short supply” in a production with “no coherent performance style or directorial vision.” Though the play received a successful extension at the Mineshaft, Vito had had his fill of theater. Plenty of other interests were competing for his attention.
On Friday, July 3, 1981, Vito scribbled a randy Closet inscription to Doric: “Since you bought a copy you can take my clothes off—Love you xx Vito.” That morning, he failed to notice an article that appeared on page 20 of the New York Times. Even if he had read “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” the piece gave gay men two reasons to dismiss it out of hand: (1) the author, Dr. Lawrence K. Altman, proclaimed that although eight men had already died, the “cause of the outbreak [was] unknown” and presented as yet “no evidence of contagion”; (2) Altman quoted Dr. James Curran of the Centers for Disease Control as reassuring nervous straights that there was “no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals from contagion.” Many gay readers smirked. Ah, yes. So long as the hets were safe. The article was just pseudo-scientific nonsense from a paper that blushed blue where gay news was concerned. The Times didn’t mention this strange new cancer again for nearly two months, by which time the number of those afflicted had more than doubled.

Overwhelmed by the publication of the Closet and his romance with Jeffrey, Vito barely noticed these developments. But central as he was to gay political and social circles, he began receiving disquieting bulletins far earlier than most people. The first casualty was Nick Rock, a sweet, sexy bartender from Vito’s Islanders Club days. When he returned from Europe in October 1980, he heard the wrenching story of Nick’s lover, Enno Poersch, carrying the emaciated Nick in his arms from house to house in the Pines, begging, “Does anyone know what’s wrong with Nick?” No one did until, bafflingly, he was diagnosed with toxoplasmosis in November. By January he was dead. Altman’s article was still six months off.

In the summer of 1981, Stephen Harvey of MoMA began suffering a “weird siege of immobilizing complaints... agonizing stomach viruses, flus and fevers, an eye infection that made [him] look and feel like Quasimodo.” At the same time, Jed Mattes told Vito about the sudden illness of his Fire Island housemate, Joffrey Ballet fundraiser Donald Krintzman. Over the July 4 weekend, Krintzman distributed photocopies of Altman’s article among his friends in the Pines. Within two weeks, he was diagnosed with Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS), the cancer that was starting to explode in purple blotches all over the bodies of gay men, the majority of whom died within months. In his doctor’s office, Krintzman bumped into fellow patient Larry Kramer, who was beginning to think that these inexplicable illnesses weren’t isolated cases. On August 11, Kramer invited Krintzman and some eighty other men—the “crème de la crème of New York’s A-list gay nightlife”—to his 5th Avenue apartment, where the NYU Medical Center’s Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien implored his affluent audience for research funds.

Vito, who was spending that week in San Francisco with Jeff, wasn’t present. Even if he had been in town, he probably wouldn’t have made Kramer’s guest list. At the time generally unsure where he would find next month’s rent, Vito
had nothing to spare for medical research. Still, he gave the new disease a nod that fall by blasting the National Gay Rodeo for naming muscular dystrophy as its charitable beneficiary even as “gay men [were] dying from a rare form of cancer [that] desperately need[ed] research and funding.” The following spring, in April 1982, he swallowed his hatred of disco and dutifully attended “Showers,” a benefit for the newly formed Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), at the once legendary, now declining, Paradise Garage. Slathered in lurid red for the festivities, the Garage housed hundreds of disco divas gyrating to the stylings of the Ritchie Family and Evelyn “Champagne” King, debuting “Love Come Down.” Vito winced. It was all for a good cause, but this cacophony was precisely why he preferred to hole up at home with Billie Holiday. About the disease they were all there to fight, this recently named “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency” (GRID), he had already determined that it simply was “not gonna happen” to him.

But as a regular reader of the Native, Vito couldn’t ignore the illness’s mounting press. In May 1981, the paper scooped the Times by six weeks when it published the world’s first journalistic article on AIDS: Dr. Lawrence Mass’s “Disease Rumors Largely Unfounded.” Over the next two years, Mass’s pieces on the new cancer appeared regularly in the Native. A cofounder of GMHC, the physician steeped himself in the few available facts and the hurricane of rumors surrounding the disease. His writing of the period shows a clear-eyed attempt to process bewildering medical information for lay readers. In “Cancer in the Gay Community,” Mass quotes Friedman-Kien’s assertion that “most (but not all) of the homosexuals in [their] study admitted to having had multiple sexual encounters with different partners, and to having had a variety of past infections.” For someone who frequented the baths and the Glory Hole as regularly as Vito, and for someone who had suffered syphilis along with other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), these were terrifying words. Even more frightening was Mass’s declaration that “as many as 80 to 85 percent of sexually active gay men in some major cities [might] already be immune-deficient” without knowing it. A “time bomb,” he warned, might be lurking in their systems.

Despite his fear, Vito couldn’t help but admire Mass’s efforts to counter the rising hysteria. Bracketing the doctor’s meticulous reportage were some welcome jests, as when, enumerating the disease’s possible cofactors (poppers, rimming, collateral STDs), he cracked, “On the superficial basis of numbers alone . . . wearing handkerchiefed Levi’s and having Judy Garland records in one’s collection might also seem risky.” Mass also tried to avoid indicting sexual activity amid growing suspicion that sex and compromised immunity were somehow related. Well before the identification of a blood-borne virus, many gay men were voicing the panic that Larry Kramer articulated in the Native: “All it seems to take is the one wrong fuck. That’s not promiscuity—that’s bad luck.”
Mass advocated calm and self-regard, flatly denying that “immorality” could cause illness. He advised his gay readers not to “waste valuable energies on negative reactions to sex. Now more than ever, ignorance, arrogance, and hypocrisy about sex [were] to be repudiated. If anything, [gay men should] be even more genuinely affirmative about [their] sexuality.”

A few days before Christmas 1981, Vito invited Mass to a cocktail party at his apartment. Several of New York’s gay literati were already milling about his redecorated two rooms: Larry Kramer, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, Native and Christopher Street publisher Chuck Ortleb. Amid the crowd, Mass spotted a sharp English professor he’d met over a year earlier at the Everard Baths. He wandered over to reintroduce himself to Arnie, who drew a blank. The din of the party didn’t allow much chance for reconnection, and on departure, Arnie forgot Larry anew. When they met again at Vito’s in March, Larry had to identify himself and explain once more how they had met. The following August, when they bumped into each other at the Everard, Arnie finally remembered the handsome, bearish doctor with the thick black beard and warm dark eyes. A month later, he moved his toiletries from his Upper West Side flat to Larry’s Chelsea loft.

Vito was delighted to play a part in Arnie and Larry’s romance just as his own love life got cooking again. In January 1982, Jeff returned to San Francisco at Vito’s suggestion. Within weeks, Vito was miserably lonely. At the end of February, he interviewed Jessica Lange and Jessica Harper in Los Angeles, where Jeff joined him before they flew north together for ten blissful days in San Francisco. Though Jeff still had no idea what to do with his life, he and Vito agreed to work on their problems. At the end of May, Jeff moved back to New York.

Vito’s New York friends were less charmed by Jeff than his San Francisco circle. Theater critic Don Shewey thought him a “tall blond cutie-pie,” decidedly “not the brightest light on the dashboard.” In Don’s view, Vito and Jeff seemed more like “playmates” than a well-matched couple. Bill Johnson agreed. Between Vito and Jeff, Bill noticed no serious moments; everything seemed to be smiles and silliness. But Bill also felt that in some way Jeff made Vito feel “safe”—that his rangy frame was literally big enough to envelop Vito and shield him from unnamed fears.

Arnie and Larry did their best to accept Jeff, but Larry guessed him to be clinically depressed while Arnie found it frustrating trying to relate to someone who seemed a veritable “non-presence.” For his definitive portrait of Jeff, Arnie offers a tableau that he accidentally witnessed during a weekend visit to East Hampton. Entering a room, Arnie came upon Jeff “gazing at himself” in a closet mirror: “He was sitting in front of it in the pose of The Little Mermaid, with one leg on top of the other, and just [Arnie adopts a wispy tone]—brushing—his hair—and doing it totally sensually—[he was] completely involved in the process—‘I love . . . my
hair . . .’’ Asked whether they considered Jeff to be self-absorbed, Arnie and Larry both laugh and reply, “Totally.” Despite his love of film and of Vito, they believe that Jeff never bothered to read *The Celluloid Closet.*

Vito realized that the problems plaguing their relationship were still with them. Unable or unwilling to hold a job, Jeff defaulted on his half of two months’ rent. While insisting that he still felt “good” about his lover, Vito had to admit that Jeff was more a “dependent” than an equal. Vito upbraided himself for getting caught in a familiar trap, expecting equal measures of “closeness and independence” in a relationship. In gross underestimation of Steve and Bill, he mused, “None of the men in my life have ever been go-getters of any kind. Perhaps that’s a mistake or perhaps the mistake is thinking that I can live with another person on a regular basis. It’s taken me 36 years to even consider that I belong by myself.” As a writer, he needed privacy and space. In their tiny apartment, he could never escape his lover’s fastidiousness. Vito complained in his journal: “[Jeff] does his nails for hours at a time, can make a bed for 30 minutes until it’s right. Drives me nuts.” As did Jeff’s stony silence when they went out. As did his sexual conservatism. Knowing Jeff’s distaste for extracurricular play, Vito agreed to his first monogamous relationship. A year later, he was feeling the strain. Exclusivity didn’t come naturally to him.

By 1982, the sexual landscape was beginning to change. As more gay men fell sick, Vito was questioning the safety of what went on at his favorite sex clubs. Although “GRID” was renamed “AIDS” (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in July 1982, there was still very little information available about what caused it. By March 1983, San Francisco doctor Marcus Conant was advocating the very unpopular suggestion that gay men use condoms during sex. This idea wasn’t new back East, where Vito’s long-time physician, Ron Grossman, had spent years begging gay patients to wear their rubbers. On “bended knee,” he would implore, “Blank, this is your fifth case of gonorrhea this year! What does it take?!” But condoms were thought the province of horny heterosexual teenagers, not sophisticated gay men. The box of Trojans sitting in Dr. Grossman’s desk drawer remained undistributed.

When Vito was treated for syphilis in 1979, his view of condoms was exactly the same as that of the hundreds of other gay men parading through Dr. Grossman’s office. But three months ahead of Dr. Conant’s warnings, Vito began to push condom use among his friends. In December 1982, upon meeting twenty-two-year-old politico David Kirby, he “turned the Serious Volume up and said, ‘You know you have to wear condoms when you have sex.’” This was news to David, who “didn’t even know that it would be possible to prevent [AIDS]; it didn’t even *occur* to [him] that it would be transmitted *sexually.*” He comments, “[Vito’s message] just stuck with me, and boy, I—it stuck with me.”
Instructional moments notwithstanding, AIDS wasn’t foremost in Vito’s mind. Arnie and Larry, he snorted, were “obsessed” with the topic. When Jim Owles dismissed AIDS as a media distortion and argued, “It’s not as if all of us are going to die,” Arnie soberly replied, “Our world is going to crumble around us.” Vito agreed with Jim; “[Larry was] super paranoid about everything—they’ll blame the gays for diseases, they’ll come to get us etc etc.” Vito determined to focus on other matters. “I’ll stick to worrying about my TV show,” he vowed, “and make my contribution that way.”

Ironically, the show in question came about through Larry’s commitment to fighting AIDS. In June 1982, he had appeared on the first television program about the syndrome, a thirty-minute WNYC-TV broadcast titled The Lavender Connection. Producers Rick Siggelkow, Silvana Moscato, and WNYC director John Beck noted the passionate audience response and began to consider a weekly program on gay and lesbian issues. Chuck Ortleb strongly supported the idea, arguing to Siggelkow and Beck that through television, they could reach a much wider audience about AIDS than he could through the Native or Christopher Street. In late September, the production team approached Vito to cohost the show with Moscato. With his writing at a standstill, he jumped at the opportunity. Vito christened the program Our Time, a title he borrowed from an anthem in the recent Stephen Sondheim Broadway flop Merrily We Roll Along (1981).

Our Time’s sole predecessor was Emerald City, the late seventies gay-themed magazine show for which Vito had served as an occasional interviewer. This new show, its creators decided, would also focus on the gay arts community. Vito arranged interviews with the founders of the lesbian performance troupe Split Britches, with the codirectors of the newly formed Meridian Gay Theatre Company, and in the dressing room of Harvey Fierstein, whose epic Torch Song Trilogy (1983) would shortly win Tony Awards for Best Play and Best Actor. When Tennessee Williams died in February 1983, Vito and coproducer George DeStefano assembled a tribute that included an interview with one of Williams’s frequent stage and screen interpreters, Madeleine Sherwood.

But Our Time went far beyond entertainment. It also featured interviews with gay activists and politicians. It explored AIDS, drag, racism, ageism, substance abuse within the gay community, gay history, strategies for coming out, and the plight of gay teachers. Weekly street interviews solicited popular opinion on these and other topics. Vito, determined that the show reach a broader audience than white, wealthy, middle-aged gay men, planned segments on Latino and black gays and lesbians, as well as gay youth of all races. Months before Manhattan opened its first LGBT community center, Vito filled each broadcast with calendar listings of events and meetings of interest to the gay community. In its efforts to inform and entertain, Our Time became television’s first news show for the lesbian and gay community.
The WNYC brass, however, didn’t appreciate *Our Time*’s historic importance. In the days of high Reaganism, New York City was under the stewardship of bachelor Mayor Ed Koch, who had previously championed gay civil rights but now, with AIDS on the rise, didn’t want to associate himself closely with gay causes. Owned by city government, WNYC was an improbable home for *Our Time*. Station bureaucrats demanded to know why the show wasn’t airing on PBS, if it had to air at all. Only John Beck and Rick Siggelkow’s iron determination saw their baby to the screen.

Before filming began in January 1983, the production team convened an advisory panel to brainstorm topics and guests. The staid Municipal Building had seldom seen such an outré grab bag of visitors. City officials gaped at the sight of seventy-three-year old *Naked Civil Servant* (1968) author Quentin Crisp, resplendent in eye shadow and silk scarf, wandering the halls lost. Another advisor arrived after witnessing a police raid on Blues Bar, a gay African American Times Square hangout where one officer capped off thirty thousand dollars’ worth of damage by slamming bullets to the floor and shouting, “These are faggot suppositories!” The *Our Time* visitor scooped the bullets up, the better to slap them the next morning on a Municipal Building conference table. “That’s what this show should be dealing with.”

Alas, homophobia was one of the few major issues that *Our Time* did not tackle in its thirteen-week run. The producers adopted a far lighter tone for their premiere episode. In a pale blue shirt unbuttoned to reveal copious chest hair, Vito addresses viewers with a grin: “Hey, are you sick and tired of watching the gay son on *Dynasty* pop in and out of the closet like a jack-in-the-box? Is he gay or straight this week, or what? Also, did you stop watching *Hollywood Squares* when Paul Lynde died—and even Richard Simmons can’t cheer you up?” From its debut, *Our Time* offered itself as a cure for gay and lesbian viewers sick of seeing their lives laundered off the small screen.

The production team realized the gold mine they had in Vito’s Rolodex, brimming with the names of everyone who was anyone in the gay community. The first guests included historian John D’Emilio (author of the newly published *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*), Harry Hay (founder of the Mattachine Society), and Vito’s friend, veteran lesbian activist Barbara Gittings. Hay, who appeared on camera in red velvet pants, a glittery black scarf, and one ornate earring, delighted Vito with tales of his activism dating back to the twenties, when gay men were referred to as “temperamental.”

Vito couldn’t have been happier with the episode’s content. Production circumstances were another story. *Our Time* was assigned a minuscule budget: $30,000 for all salaries. Associate producer Jay Blotcher, earning $45 every other week, took to skipping meals and hopping over subway turnstiles. When the young man pleaded extreme poverty, Siggelkow raised his salary to $125 per
week—a veritable fortune to the recent college grad and Native journalist. The Our Time set was equally humble, a tableau of early cable-access penury. For the first few episodes, hosts and guests sat on wicker-back dining-room chairs with a plastic cube “table” as the only other furniture. In later weeks a plum loveseat, glass coffee table, and flowers softened the show’s look, but producer Barbara Kerr chuckles that the loveseat was lifted from another WNYC office. She was less amused by having to beg the station for three-quarter-inch videotape.

Used to indigence, Vito ignored the set and the dismal salaries. But lapses in professionalism made him burn. Our Time’s first broadcast on February 27, 1983, was riddled with glitches—whether through “political sabotage or technological ineptitude,” Blotcher wasn’t sure, but it gave the show an inauspicious debut. Vito, meanwhile, was seething over coproducer Silvana Moscato, who, he declared, “really has to go.” Deeply uncomfortable on camera, Moscato cried before the taping of her segments. Her reading of cue cards is painfully obvious, and several flubbed lines remain in finished takes. Recognizing her fragility, Vito tried to be patient and helpful. Jay Blotcher thought his mentor “lesbian underneath” the skin; Vito did whatever he could to secure maximum exposure for women. But after watching Moscato’s deadly interviews of lesbian-music pioneers Alix Dobkin and Meg Christian in episode 3, he had to pull the plug.

For Moscato’s replacement, Vito approached film and dance critic Marcia Pally, whom he had been considering for months. Pally had published for several years in Christopher Street, the Advocate, and the Native, in whose offices Vito popped the question. When she protested her inexperience in television, Vito reassured her that the show was “experimental,” insisting, “We’ll work it out, let’s do it!” Emboldened by his confidence, Pally swallowed her hesitation.

She needn’t have worried. The camera adored her clear blue eyes, high forehead, and the glossy dark hair that she wore swept up in combs. Like Vito, Marcia was wholly at ease on camera, addressing her interview subjects warmly and her home viewers as if they were physically present. And her sensibilities complemented Vito’s beautifully. For their episode on drag, Marcia donned a fedora and tux to croon, à la Dietrich, “Falling in Love Again” to the camera. From under a beribboned, broad-brimmed hat, Vito revealed his mustachioed face and inquired of viewers, “Does drag make you nervous? Why do you suppose it is that it’s acceptable for women to wear pants but not for men to wear a dress?” After the cohosts switched hats, Marcia sniffed a rosebud at Vito’s left nipple while he reminded viewers of drag queens’ role in Stonewall. He then interviewed Michael (“Tiffany”) Bowers and showed him a clip of the 1973 Pride Gala fracas that reduced Bowers to tears. (Bowers may also have been crying for the failing health of his longtime performing partner “Billie” Blackwell, who would die of AIDS complications before the month was out.)
Vito held Bowers’s hand and tried to comfort him—but the real drama that
day was behind the scenes. One of the episode’s other interviewees was “Little
John Basso,” Vito’s former GAA crony, recently released from jail after serving
several years for a Brooklyn bank robbery. When Vito asked his opinion of *Dog
Day Afternoon*, the film made about his experience, Basso declared it “about 70%
garbage” and argued that although leading man Al Pacino was “cuter” than he
was, he was “not as nutty and . . . not as comical.” Vito breezed past this self-
aggrandizement, possibly because he could see what was unfolding just beyond
the camera’s view. Basso’s former lover, transsexual Liz Eden (née Ernest Aron),
had just finished her interview with Marcia. Eden stood in the shadows, fuming
over Basso’s repeated references to her as “Ernie.” Her parents didn’t yet realize
that their son had become their daughter. The second Basso left the set, Eden
tore after him, shrieking, “You fucker! I’m gonna make sure you go back to
prison!” Out of the building Basso raced, with Eden in hot pursuit.

Through her own connections, Marcia secured some significant interviews,
including one of director John Sayles, promoting his acclaimed lesbian drama
*Lianna* (1983). She also got her share of on-set drama through Brad Davis, the
volatile star of *Midnight Express* (1978) and, more recently, Fassbinder’s homo-
erotic *Querelle* (1983). Having previously interviewed Davis, Marcia knew to
expect the unexpected. At one of their meetings, he emerged from his hotel
bedroom and announced, “Sorry I’m late—I was just jerking off.” On the *Our
Time* set, Jay Blotcher watched warily as Davis and his *Querelle* producer, Dieter
Schidor, returned from a bathroom visit “extremely elevated in mood” and
racing about the room.

Given occasional tension on the set, it’s no wonder that Vito and Jay got
blissfully stoned at the end of most shoots. Doing so can only have helped Jay the
day that Vito asked him whether he’d come out to his parents. When Jay said
that he had, Vito replied, “You’re on in five minutes.” Their scheduled guest
from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays had canceled at the last minute.
Jay was his startled, last-minute replacement.

It’s also no wonder that Vito booked friends on the show to soothe his anx-
ieties. He coaxed Jed Mattes into discussing his struggles with alcoholism and
historian Martin Duberman into participating on a panel reviewing racism in
the gay community. Arthur Bell, who told Jay that he thought Vito was wasting
his time on television and should return to writing, accepted an invitation as
well. Arnie, discussing his nostalgia for GAA and his insistence that gay men, in
the face of AIDS, must “care for [themselves] and each other,” made a much
less acidulous guest than Arthur. He did, however, get in one sally at a bigot’s ex-
 pense. When Vito announced that upcoming guests would include drag queens
Sylvia Rivera (who ultimately did not appear) and Sister Missionary Position
(from San Francisco’s Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence), Arnie hooted, “Great!
All of Jerry Falwell’s favorite people!” The joke was well timed, as Vito found Falwellesque sentiments in *Our Time*’s mailbag. One, written two days before the show’s debut, he read on the air: “It comes from Queens, New York, as if you couldn’t figure that out. ‘Dear Sir: I deeply resent the new homo [Vito grins] cable TV show . . . The world is in [sic] bad enough without having this evil in our home. Needless to say, this is going to be stopped. It is a sick show for sick pepep,’ P-E-P-E-L . . . and it’s signed, ‘A Disgusted Mother.’” Vito urged viewers to send in more letters and pledged that *Our Time* would not be stopped, especially not by anonymous doomsayers.

He recaptured the show’s humor by bringing on his friend, activist and author Karla Jay, as wacky lesbian advice columnist Gabby Tidbit. In her segment, “Gabby” ribbed the episode’s other guest, Rita Mae Brown, who had recently broken up with Martina Navratilova. Spoofing Brown’s southern persona, Gabby read a letter dripping in Spanish moss from “RMB” (“that stands for Really Mad Bachelorette”), seeking advice on how to cope with being left all alone on her Virginia plantation with five cats, three cars, a labia-shaped swimming pool, and “a dumb old tennis court.” To Karla’s shock, Brown, whom she’d known since their Lavender Menace days of 1970, didn’t recognize her. She only learned Gabby’s identity when Vito spilled the beans.

*Our Time*’s most prominent guest was Lily Tomlin. In late January 1983, when she flew to New York to host *Saturday Night Live*, Vito pounced. The following Tuesday, he and several crew members picked her up at her Midtown hotel and drove, with Lily poised on Vito’s lap, to frigid Central Park to film a few skits. Seated on the ornate stone balustrade above Bethesda Fountain, Lily played an airhead poet who performs her progay verse creations (written by Jay as an *Our Time* promo) for the camera.

Vito was overjoyed. Lily, when she saw the footage, was not. Deciding that she didn’t like the material or her performance of it, she wouldn’t allow the segment to be aired. When Vito moaned that the show needed her star power, she allowed him to film her in a different sequence—but it would have to be several months later in Cleveland, where she was touring. He and a small crew scraped together funds and flew west to meet Lily in character as earnest Mrs. Judith Beasley, self-appointed emissary of “the heterosexual community” to gays and lesbians.

Sitting in a lesbian bar and screaming over the din of Bowie’s “Let’s Dance,” Mrs. Beasley winks at her closeted creator when she laments that many of the patrons will not show their faces to the camera. Later, at the entrance to a gay-male bar, Mrs. Beasley offers up a “Quiche of Peace” to the doorman. Asked by interviewer Vito if her husband likes the dish, Mrs. B shakes her head and sends up Bruce Feirstein’s then-bestselling book: “You know, real men don’t eat quiche. I know they can’t spell it.” The episode went on to be *Our Time*’s best loved.
The series’ most important episode focused on AIDS. Just as the show was filmed in early March 1983, Larry Kramer published a *Native* article whose title, “1,112 and Counting,” referenced the number of known AIDS sufferers, nearly half of whom were gay or bisexual men in New York City. Like most readers, Vito was floored, and then inspired, by Kramer’s first two sentences: “If this article doesn’t scare the shit out of you, we’re in real trouble. If this article doesn’t rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth.” Kramer went on to blast overflowing hospitals, the indifference of the National Institutes of Health to a “gay” disease, the relative silence of the *Advocate* and the *Village Voice* about so many gay deaths, and a New York City mayor who refused to meet with the gay community to discuss AIDS or to speak publicly about the escalating health crisis. His rhetoric amped up GAA-style anger a thousandfold. The community was trying to salvage not jobs or housing but gay lives.

At the start of the show, Marcia calmly defined AIDS and specified its mortality rates. Vito, by contrast, was a nervous wreck. He stumbled over his notes while announcing that more than two hundred AIDS cases had appeared in the previous week alone. He stabbed an index finger at the camera to underscore that in November 1982, New York saw forty-seven new AIDS cases, the total number of which worldwide was expected to double by the end of 1983. A cut to Vito’s street interviews found one gay man remarking that although he practiced monogamy, one of his acquaintances was “still as active as possible.” His circle of friends, the man reported, called him “The Carrier.” The man chuckled, but Vito’s off-camera chill was palpable.

Later in the episode, Vito interviewed Virginia Apuzzo, executive director of the National Gay Task Force (and eventually, President Clinton’s associate deputy secretary of labor), who told him that New York City spent more money in the winter of 1983 shoveling street snow than it did on AIDS care or research. In the same segment, Larry Kramer reached an apocalyptic pitch: “We have never been in such a terribly threatening position. The whole history of being gay, the whole history of homosexuality—this is life and death; we are dying.” As he would for the rest of his activist career, Kramer attempted to kick-start gays to political action: “We are going to have to unite; we are going to have to be angry; we are going to have to be perceived as a threat.” Vito echoed these sentiments, commenting, “I don’t blame you for being angry; I’d like a lot of people in this community angry.”

Nothing seemed to stir more anger in the gay community than the debate over gay-male promiscuity, a topic that hit Vito squarely in the heart. While he was readying *Our Time* during the late fall of 1982, two *Native* articles set the debate’s terms at full volume. The first was cowritten by Richard Berkowitz, whom Vito had met in 1976 when the Rutgers journalism major interviewed him for his school newspaper. Six years later, while working in Manhattan as an
S and M hustler, Berkowitz discovered that he had AIDS. With fellow patient Michael Callen (later lead singer of the Flirtations) and their doctor, Joseph Sonnabend, Berkowitz began canvassing his support group to find common denominators among gay men who were falling ill. Listening to the group’s stories, he concluded that “everyone was a huge slut!” Speculation about a single AIDS-causing virus had begun to spread, but Berkowitz and Callen didn’t buy it. In their *Native* article, they identified themselves as practitioners of “excessive promiscuity,” insisting, “We know who we are and we know why we’re sick.” By visiting countless “bathhouses, backrooms, balconies, sex clubs, meat racks, and tearooms,” they theorized, they had flooded their bodies with “common viruses and other sexually transmitted infections.” For Berkowitz and Callen, AIDS wasn’t a matter of “good luck/bad luck” with regard to some as-yet unidentified virus; the operative question was “Did you live like a sex pig, or didn’t you?”

From the outset, the “promiscuity” hypothesis seemed flawed. How could it account for the intravenous drug users, Haitian immigrants, and blood-product recipients who were also falling ill? It also raised a storm of protest among gay men who felt that the “war on promiscuity” attacked their very identities. Dance critic Charles Jurrist lashed back at Berkowitz and Callen in the *Native* the following month, arguing that since the cause of AIDS remained unknown, it was surely “premature” to halt the sexual freedom that had been the heart of gay liberation. In any event, Jurrist snapped, male sex drives didn’t lend themselves to monogamy.

Vito empathized with elements of both arguments. Over the years he’d paid too many tiresome visits to Ron Grossman’s office not to realize that his very active sex life carried consequences. But he also revelled in his sexuality and the deep connection that he received from making love with other men. Knowing that many gay men were torn between these conflicting impulses, he invited Callen and Jurrist to air their views on *Our Time*. Backstage, the discussion became so heated that Vito had to flip a coin to decide which speaker would go first. Jurrist won the toss and added to his *Native* arguments the observation that one of his opponents was a former hustler “who provided pain for a price.” When he heard this, Berkowitz considered legal action. Having been very discreet about his work, he surmised that Vito, whom he perceived as disapproving of his stance on promiscuity, had shared the information with Jurrist in an effort to smear Berkowitz on the air. Following Jurrist, Callen advanced a message of positive sexuality. Sex was far from “over,” he insisted; AIDS simply meant that gay men had to begin practicing “safe sex” with condoms, jerk-off clubs, and closed circles of sex partners. Anything else represented a dismissal of life or an ignorance of death.

Gay Manhattan loved *Our Time*, a fact that producers realized not just from positive word of mouth but also from the unsolicited contributions that poured
in from the community. To Rick Siggelkow’s amazement, viewers volunteered checks of varying sizes, which he took as “a great testament to the fact that the show was really touching people’s lives.” The powers at WNYC told Rick they would authorize a second season if he personally could raise funds to meet increased overhead the following year. That much love the show did not receive. After thirteen episodes, WNYC took Our Time off the air in early May 1983.

As the show came to an end, Vito enjoyed one perfect evening at Madison Square Garden, where Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus mounted a fundraiser for GMHC. Having promoted the event for weeks to his viewers, Vito was extremely gratified on the night of April 30 to see the Garden’s nearly eighteen thousand seats sold out. To no one’s great surprise, the mainstream media didn’t show up. But celebrities did. Leonard Bernstein conducted the national anthem. Grande dame Hermione Gingold was seated alone a few rows away from Vito, who raced over and asked her to join him. Even Mayor Koch appeared and uttered, according to Andrew Holleran, “all the right things.” The event was a spectacular success.

It was the best evening Vito had for a long time. Two days later, he learned that Larry Mass had fallen into a suicidal depression. While battling addictions to alcohol and marijuana, Larry was paralyzed with despair over ferocious GMHC infighting and his own powerlessness as a physician forced to watch gay men die at escalating rates. He checked himself into St. Vincent’s Hospital for treatment. A long road to recovery lay ahead.

Vito’s life was spiraling out of control as well. For one thing, his mother was losing mental and physical ground. A hypochondriac, Annie was in and out of hospitals with a variety of ailments that were destroying her peace of mind. A benign spot on her colon sent her into hysterics. Vito ran telephone interference but left Charlie to deal with their mother’s many visits to doctors’ offices and emergency rooms.

More pressingly, Vito was reaching another impasse with Jeff, whose reclusiveness, aimlessness, and mood swings had become unmanageable. Vito longed to “fix” everything, but he was also convinced that the relationship’s main problems stemmed from Jeff’s refusal to take on adult responsibilities. In the middle of July, Vito asked him to leave the apartment. Jeff took the request badly and told Vito that he felt he was being tossed “out in the snow” with nowhere to go. Groaning over this unseasonable turn of phrase, Vito borrowed a line from Thelma Ritter to record it in his journal. Jeff’s melodramatic exit, he giggled, had “everything but the bloodhounds snapping at her rear end.” Sarcasm aside, Vito mourned that he could neither help Jeff nor live with him any longer. He struggled to convince himself he’d done the right thing. For future relationships, he resolved, “no more wives”—only men “so rich it’s ridiculous or so motivated they’re never home.”
His own motivation was nil. Without a compelling project, Vito wasn’t trying to make his own opportunities. It was all too easy to lie about the apartment watching cable, working crossword puzzles, and savaging himself as “a fraud or lazy or a lazy fraud.” Throughout the blazing summer of 1983, he couldn’t rouse himself to any effort. A trip to Fire Island, where the mood was sepulchral, offered no relief. According to one regular, many gay men were terrified of catching AIDS from Meat Rack mosquitoes. During his uncharacteristically sexless week, Vito found the population sparse and subdued. Those present made him feel small. It wasn’t easy, he remarked, “[being] surrounded constantly by people my age making it big. Feeling more and more limited by my own ideas of life, having money, succeeding, doing what one does. Everyone seems to take care of their future and themselves. I seem to drift along trying to be likeable and in the end you’re a loser and they don’t like you.”

In August, with $185 to his name, he took the drastic measure of selling his 16mm copies of *Victim* and *The Gay Deceivers* (1969) to Adam Reilly. The loss cut deeply, but he couldn’t turn down $350. He also couldn’t turn down a job as manager of the 8th Street Playhouse, where *Closet* features had been such a hit the previous summer. The stint lasted ten days. The hours and pay ($225 per week) were atrocious, but what most upset Vito was the behavior of his boss, a man with AIDS who continued to sleep around because, he claimed, “I can’t stop living.” Vito retorted in his diary, “Wanna bet, Steve? Shocking.” Vito began monitoring his own body for signs of illness. He started on vitamins, added ten pounds to his rail-thin frame, and convinced himself that he didn’t have AIDS.

He had to admit that a poor diet and nicotine addiction—which even hypnosis couldn’t cure—were adding to his troubles. With “no boyfriend and a crazy mother,” he also knew that being alone made it harder for him to cope with stress. Over the next several months, Vito and Jeff paid each other a couple of lengthy visits in San Francisco and New York. After a painful week in San Francisco, he confessed to Jeff, “I have never really loved anyone as much as I love you and it’s been very hard for me to accept that it hasn’t worked out the way I know we both wanted it to.” Fearing that he might be doomed to a life of solitude, Vito felt that he should do anything necessary to win Jeff back.

For the time being, however, they were a continent apart, and Vito needed companionship. Back in New York, he was trying to avoid the bar scene, where AIDS panic seemed to be driving all of gay Manhattan toward instant marriage. One would-be bridegroom was John Bovée, a twenty-five-year-old store manager whose professional ambition, trim build, and dark blond looks Vito found appealing. John fell hard for Vito, but the feeling wasn’t quite mutual. His “upwardly mobile values” Vito deemed a little too Clovis for comfort. Not returning John’s affection filled him with regret, which was becoming an unwelcome pattern in
his love life. “I seem to be developing a great capacity for guilt—guilty because I can’t please John, guilty because I hurt Jeff.” He decided to put romance on indefinite hold.

Work, thankfully, started offering some exciting opportunities. Rob Epstein and codirector Richard Schmiechen had just finished *Out of Order*, the film that they had begun as a study of the Briggs Initiative (California’s Proposition 6) and Harvey Milk. While working on the project, they realized that Milk’s story was far more compelling than Briggs’s. After considerable refocusing and a title change, *The Times of Harvey Milk* was ready for exhibition. Unfortunately, it had no distributor. Facing a PBS airdate along with bookings at the Telluride and New York Film Festivals, Rob and Richard signed with a New York start-up company, Teleculture, and requested that Vito be hired to oversee the film’s national publicity. Rob was convinced that Vito’s connections in media and the gay community could work word-of-mouth miracles for *Harvey Milk*. Vito didn’t let him down. Though he considered Teleculture’s director “the asshole of the eighties” and the splintering company a “fucking mess”—“just like the last days of Cambodia”—he gave his all to promoting the film.

The story of Milk’s rise to political power, and his insistence that gay rights demanded gay visibility, inspired Vito. In early November 1984, at *Harvey Milk’s* San Francisco premiere, Vito’s political anger came roaring back to life. Before a Castro Theatre audience, he attacked gay men for even considering a vote for Ronald Reagan, then running for his second presidential term. Only gay fools, Vito railed, would look to Reagan to protect their financial assets while his Supreme Court stripped away their civil rights. On a lighter note, he predicted that *Harvey Milk* would go on to win the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature—which it did the following March, the first gay-themed film to do so. Vito was elated to see a film on which he had worked reap Hollywood’s highest honor.

Vito was racking up more honors of his own. As *Closet* sales continued to ring, more organizations showered its author with accolades. In October 1984, he received a community service award from the *Washington Blade* and from Washington’s first International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. That same month, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, Lily Tomlin presented him with the Human Rights Campaign Fund’s first Arthur Bell Arts and Humanitarian Award.

Vito was extremely proud to be honored in his friend’s name, but the moment was bittersweet. Arthur had died the previous June of complications from diabetes. Two days before his death, Vito visited him at St. Vincent’s Hospital, where he found the fifty-one-year-old reduced to “a shrunken old man.” With flagging concentration, Arthur stayed awake long enough for the two old friends to acknowledge their love. Speaking at Arthur’s memorial a few weeks later, Vito thanked him for his earliest activist lessons: “He taught me that following the
rules doesn’t really guarantee you respect. . . . And he taught me that it is not tasteless to stand up and have the courage to be who you are.”

Death was asserting terrible omnipresence in gay Manhattan. In July 1983, Eddie Rosenberg was diagnosed with KS and *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP). When he died in December, Vito froze. Just a week earlier Jeff had called from San Francisco, where his dentist had found suspicious spots in his mouth and referred him to an oral surgeon. Vito held his breath.

Two months later the walls crashed in. Vito’s friend, thirty-one-year-old singer David Summers, received a KS diagnosis. Vito had met David over ten years earlier when he costarred as New Boy in Town in Al Carmine’s play *The Faggot*. Since then, David had garnered an impressive reputation on the cabaret circuit, where his campy, smart-alecky sense of humor matched Vito’s. David’s illness devastated Vito, who could no longer close his eyes to the “medieval horror story” unfolding around him. In his journal, he gasped, “I can’t accept David’s illness as fatal, can’t believe he may die. Or that it could happen to me tomorrow.” Acutely aware that David had done nothing he himself hadn’t done ten times over, Vito tried to ignore the noose tightening around his own neck.

On April 23, he took only minor comfort in Health and Human Services’ announcement of the discovery of HTLV-III (later renamed HIV), the virus that causes AIDS. A foolproof blood test and vaccine were allegedly in the works. What did these developments matter, Vito wondered, when life had “changed for all those [he knew] and for [himself] for all time”? Already an impenetrable curtain hung between past and present; already people talked “about ‘the old days’ with new meaning—they refer[ed] to a time when danger was not a part of everyday existence, when sex and death were strangers and when the future existed.” Vito couldn’t help but ask why he personally knew so many of the afflicted. True, half of the AIDS cases were in New York and he was extremely well connected, but it seemed to him that he knew a disproportionate number of dying young men. As he would later describe these days, “I mean, suddenly I was knowing a dozen people who were sick instead of two. Suddenly there were thirty people who were sick instead of four. And it hit you like an overwhelming wave of water. Suddenly cold water was thrown in your face. Everybody was dying.”

Vito’s reserve cracked further as public reaction to AIDS—and more broadly, to gay men—snapped into focus. Less than a year before his death, Arthur Bell had been accosted in a diner by a young woman who told him, “You gay pricks who deserve to die are dying.” He responded by spitting in her face and remarking, “If I’ve got AIDS, you’ve got it.” One random bigot in an East Side restaurant was an irritation; bigots who commanded the eyes and ears of millions were terrifying. In November 1984, before being barred by the American Psychological Association, Dr. Paul Cameron got significant media coverage by attacking gay men as “worse than murderers.” Jerry Falwell called
for quarantining people with AIDS. In Vito’s own backyard, New York magazine critic John Simon trumpeted in a lobby, “Homosexuals in the theater! My God, I can’t wait until AIDS gets all of them!” Mortified by these developments, Vito attended the first preview of Larry Kramer’s new play, The Normal Heart, which detailed the early years of the AIDS crisis in New York. Its depiction of gay men’s battles with each other, city bureaucracy, and their own bodies devastated him.

In this depleted state, he received the phone call that he’d been dreading for nearly eighteen months. Jeff lay in a San Francisco hospital with PCP.

Jeff had been terrified of AIDS. He shared his fear with Vito, who tried to brush it aside. When he insisted, “This is inside my body, I know it—I’m so scared,” Vito refused to listen. Jeff had so many complaints, and this was one that Vito, gripped by his own fears, simply wouldn’t entertain. When Jeff returned to San Francisco in July 1983, his friends, partners Allen Sawyer and Tom Harding, got him a job at Captain Video. Processing greasy porn tapes, Jeff fled to the bathroom several times a day to scrub his arms up to the elbows. Germ-phobic under the least threatening circumstances, he now perceived himself under constant attack. When he received his diagnosis in April 1985, he burst into tears and confessed to Tom, “What I feared most has happened.”

Within hours of learning the news, Vito was on a plane from Newark bound for San Francisco. In his journal, he released the panic that he wanted to conquer before entering Jeff’s hospital room. “My love my love Jeffrey my golden boy, my man. My heart is breaking tonight. This night should never have come to me. . . . Oh he is sick and I feel that I am dying of it. This disease has my honey. . . . My darling my love my heart hurts so much. . . . This endless flight and Jeffrey terrified in a hospital my god my god my god oh no no.” Vito longed to heal Jeffrey with his touch, “to hold him in my arms and kiss his eyes I want to feel him next to me in the sun and hold his hand I want to give him life I don’t want him to die. He can’t just die this way.” At the same time, unspeakable guilt was tearing at him. As he approached San Francisco, Vito couldn’t help wondering, “Did I give him this? Have I killed Jeff with something inside of myself?”

Jeff’s sister Theresa collected Vito at the airport and drove him directly to Children’s Hospital. At the door to Jeff’s room was a nurse taping up warnings against contact with bodily fluids. Vito burst into the room and found Jeff sitting up in bed. Absurdly, Jeff asked, “Honey, did you hear?” Vito drew a breath and sat down on the bed. “I told him that we were gonna do this together. That it was gonna be all right. I wanted so much to convince him that—I knew immediately, just from what I knew of in the community, that if he didn’t fight, he would die.” For his part, Jeff jockeyed between acceptance and denial of his illness. In braver moments, he told Vito what he wanted to hear, that he was “committed to fight” the disease. Vito, meanwhile, tried to swallow his anxiety over the
heterosexuality of Jeff’s doctor and his fear that the illness would claim him as well. He strove to be stoic while facing “the most serious thing [he had] ever had to deal with in [his] life.” At the very least, the crisis would give him “a chance to change [his] life.” He told himself, “I have to seize this and make it a life thing and not an ending.”

When Vito flew back to New York a week later, one thing was clear: he would move to San Francisco as soon as possible. Jeff was wary. “Do you realize the commitment you’re making?” he asked. Not only had their relationship repeatedly proved unworkable, but Jeff couldn’t imagine his lover, the quintessential New Yorker, relaxing into San Francisco’s Zen vibe. Vito accepted these challenges. For the first time in his adult life, he tried to perceive some benign “higher power” whose good intentions he could trust.

Vito certainly discerned goodness in the friends who rushed to his aid. Jeff’s sister Chris drove her 1977 Saab from Vail, Colorado, to San Francisco so that Vito and Jeff wouldn’t have to rely on cable cars for transportation. Money poured in from far-flung locations: Allen Sawyer and Captain Video contributed $350 toward Vito’s return airfare on April 30, Mark Pinney mailed Vito $500, and Arnie and Larry paid $900 of Vito’s soaring American Express bill. Of greatest help was Larry Bush, who found Vito work as a media consultant with the San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF). The job’s inconsequential $440 per week left Vito unable to afford decent housing, so Larry offered, rent-free, his spacious three-bedroom apartment in the Mission District.

On May 6, 1985, Vito began work at SFAF. The sex-positive organization seemed an excellent fit for him. Its colorful posters, featuring two taut male rears and the slogan “You Can Have Fun (and Be Safe, Too),” had decorated the city for over a year. But when Vito arrived in San Francisco, health officials and community activists were in an uproar over the first blood tests to detect antibodies to HTLV-III. The results of a positive reading were distressingly unclear: Would people with the antibodies necessarily develop AIDS? Would the results be made public? Would patients be required to submit lists of all previous sex partners? Would they lose jobs and housing based on test results? Were quarantines out of the question? SFAF shared these concerns until the San Francisco Health Department established free, anonymous Alternative Test Sites (ATS). In May 1985, although 78 percent of San Francisco’s gay men indicated that they would not take the test, SFAF began producing literature to inform people about where it was available and what facts it could, or could not, reveal. This was where Vito’s position at SFAF came in.

Working for SFAF’s education and prevention department, Vito collaborated with Adair Films on a ten-minute video to be screened for visitors at the city’s ATS before they had their blood drawn. Outlining the legal risks of the test’s disclosure, the video underscored that a positive reading of HTLV-III
antibodies could not definitively indicate that a person had or would get AIDS. With coworker Nancy Stoller, Vito helped develop brochures, distributed both at SFAF and the ATS, reviewing these issues at length. The SFAF writers struggled to make complex issues comprehensible for the least literate client while informing better educated readers about the latest scientific findings.

Vito’s time at SFAF was taxing. The organization’s twenty employees shared a powerful sense of purpose and felt that they were doing “really, really important work.” At the same time, with very limited funds, departmental turf wars were frequent and bitter. Individual divisions often didn’t care what happened to their counterparts as long as their own projects got approved. And death was a daily reality at SFAF. Many of its own employees were ill, and everyone was grieving the loss of loved ones. Depression at the office was unavoidable.

It was especially hard for Vito to concentrate on work while Jeff deteriorated. His determination to fight the illness was destroyed by a new doctor who, when Jeff protested that he didn’t want to go on a high-fat diet and gain weight, replied, “You’re not worried about heart disease. You’ll be dead in a year.” Vito shouted his anger and confusion in letters to Arnie. How was Jeff supposed to react to a death sentence? Keeping the faith wasn’t easy when his recovery depended on such a range of variables: “If he gets experimental drugs, if he doesn’t get placebos, if [the drugs work] anyway.” These uncertainties came on top of constant assault from bigots to whom “the Jeffs of the world [were] those awful homosexuals who are spreading their AIDS to our children through their sick lifestyle. It makes you want to kill. It makes you want to die. What an awful place to live and what an awful time to be alive.” In the final analysis, Vito concluded, “nobody knows shit, Cher, and they’re just as scared as I am.” Arnie pledged his support and urged Vito to hold tight by tossing back at him one of his pet phrases: “I only dread one day at a time.”

Vito boiled when Jeff’s doctor dismissed vitamins and good nutrition as possible immune-system boosters. At the same time, better counsel seemed impossible to find. “Every quack in town,” Vito snapped, “has given us advice—they have everything here from holistic hypnosis to vegetarian banking. A woman at Au Natural Health food store on Market [Street] put Jeff on to a no yeast diet which is hogwash as far as I’m concerned.” Unfortunately, Jeff had no interest in other treatments. Vito tried desperately to get him into trials for the new drugs ribavirin and Foscarnet, but Jeff, clinging to his macrobiotic diet, refused.

Vito and Jeff’s rapport was again deteriorating. At home, Vito found his behavior intolerable. An inveterate neatnik to Larry Bush’s “slob,” Jeff turned moody and difficult whenever his host left an errant cigarette pack lying about the house. Exploring New Age philosophies, Jeff became imperious about the colors he wanted around him. Blue he considered “healing”; yellow was toxic. For Vito’s sake, Larry tried to be a good sport about the color wars, quipping, “Well, I never looked good in yellow.”
Beyond his problems with Jeff, Vito was miserable in San Francisco. In late May, three weeks after his arrival, he bemoaned the city’s lack of summer and spark: “It’s never quite hot here, just pleasant, like their people. This is basically a small town.” Living in San Francisco convinced Vito more than ever that he was a New Yorker at heart. Unlike London, San Francisco was “not a world-class city.” It frustrated him to live in a town where people didn’t “enjoy a good scrap.” His efforts to start a political wrangle at Café Flore always ended with the same anticlimax: “You say something volatile to somebody and they just sort of smile. . . nothing upsets anyone!” And California cuisine was simply unacceptable. Reviewing the menu at a vegetarian restaurant, he announced, “If I see any tofu on my plate, I’m going to start shrieking.” Plus the looks he got from friends when he lit up a cigarette at Orphan Andy’s on Market Street! Fuhgeddaboutit.

Accompanied by Jeff, Vito ran back to New York at the end of July for a quick reality check. The week before, Rock Hudson had announced that he had AIDS; suddenly everybody was paying attention to an epidemic that had begun four years earlier. On Friday, August 2, Vito was visiting with Arnie when he glanced down at his leg. Tucked in the hollow behind his knee was a dark spot he’d never seen. Vito refused to delude himself. He knew perfectly well what it was. So did Arnie, who rushed Vito to Dr. Grossman for a biopsy.

Five days later, Vito was back in San Francisco with Arnie and Jim Owles at his side. On August 8, Ron Grossman called him at SFAF. To their mutual astonishment, the biopsy had come back negative. The spot on Vito’s leg was a mole, nothing more.

Vito returned to work feeling much better about his health, his job, and his temporary home. On Tuesday, August 13, his phone rang at SFAF. It was Ron again, this time sounding ragged. “I will never, ever be able to make this up to you,” he began. Vito froze. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but the lab switched your slide with the slide of an 86-year-old heterosexual woman who has gotten a KS diagnosis, which is not possible. So I’m sorry to tell you this, but it turns out it’s positive after all and you do have KS.” Vito hung up the phone and burst into tears. He told Nancy what had happened and asked her not to tell anyone. Arnie, whom Ron had already alerted, raced to SFAF with Jim. As he awaited their arrival, Vito sat in a stupor at his desk. His reaction to Ron’s call took on cinematic coloring: “At that point I sort of felt like Susan Hayward in I Want to Live! [1958], you know, with the governor giving her a pardon every five minutes and then the phone ringing. It just drives you nuts. The stress was enormous. I was at the end of my emotional rope—and this was the final verdict. The final verdict was that I had AIDS.” His life expectancy, Ron estimated, was one year.

Arnie and Jim swung into immediate action. They picked Vito up at SFAF and took him and Jeff out to lunch. Several days later, they tried to cheer Vito with a trip to the Great American Amusement Park. The following week, they arranged a trip to Lake Tahoe, where Jeff’s depression made everyone miserable.
Arnie sensed that Jeff was jealous to see Vito, as a newly sick person, receiving the attention that had been reserved for him. Utterly despondent, Jeff “became this thing we were pulling along on wheels.” After two days, when Arnie intervened and told Jeff that he needed psychological help, Jeff shut down completely and put himself on a bus back to San Francisco. Once more, Vito could see their relationship heading for the rocks.

Upon learning of his illness, Vito adopted a staunch resolve to “think clearly, have hope, be strong, not give in, not despair for [himself] and for all the fine loving people around [him].” He refused to be “a sick person if [he could] help it.” The example of David Summers, thriving eighteen months after his diagnosis, inspired him. He determined to get himself and Jeff to Montreal for an upcoming Foscarnet trial. “I am not yet ready to prepare to die,” Vito declared. “I am ready to prepare instead to dine—preferably in Europe or on a cruise to the Caribbean.”

Before heading abroad, Vito knew that he had to return to New York. His closest friends were there, and for the sake of his own health, he had to be where he felt most comfortable. He also had the prospect of being hired as GMHC’s public information officer at an annual salary of twenty-eight thousand dollars—far more money than he had ever earned in a year. The unsolved dilemma was Jeff, who wanted him to remain in San Francisco. While that was out of the question, so was leaving Jeff alone. The need to take care of his childlike lover still ruled him.

Vito and Jeff returned to New York on October 10, 1985, one week after Rock Hudson’s death made headlines worldwide. Two days later, Arnie and Larry threw their friends a “welcome back” brunch that ended in emotional disaster. One of the guests was Richie Brandys, a significantly younger friend with AIDS. Richie had recently lost his hair to chemotherapy and was struggling with a paralyzed arm that left him unable to tie his shoes or zip his fly unassisted. Appalled by this sight, Vito retreated to a corner of the loft, “musing on subjects like whether it’s worth saving receipts if one isn’t sure that he will live to file another income tax return. ‘They’ve taken my future away,’” he told Arnie. Within days, Vito fell into deeper depression when he learned that John Bovée’s brother Gene had died of AIDS complications. At the memorial, Arnie and Vito held hands and sobbed, realizing that they were “crying as much for the death that threatens to end [their] 15 years of love as [they] were mourning for those already gone.” Vito asked Arnie to help him die if his suffering became intolerable.

Fighting off despair, Vito threw himself into medical research. From the earliest days of his diagnosis, he impressed doctors with his knowledge of AIDS. Dr. Marcus Conant, one of the first doctors to treat AIDS patients and a co-founder of the organization that would become SFAF, saw Vito in San Francisco and found him extremely upbeat. His familiarity with experimental drugs
clearly came from informed reading, not rumor or speculation. In New York, Ron Grossman was stunned by the meticulous letters he received from Vito. By the end of August, Vito was already assessing antiviral drugs and immune modulators. From Ron he sought advice on whether his instinct to “kill the virus and keep it from replicating” while he still enjoyed a high T-cell count was sound. Reviewing Vito’s questions today, Ron remarks, “Here is Vito Russo who, to my knowledge, does not have an MD after his name, getting it exactly right in 1985, when most doctors [hadn’t] a clue.”

Vito’s questions grew dauntingly specific as he ran up against contradictory medical information. Noting ribavirin’s low toxicity and apparent efficacy at blocking the virus, he asked his friends in Bloolips to bring him a supply from Mexico, which, unlike the United States, sold the drug legally. (“Very heavy, wasn’t it,” Bette Bourne sighed over the six-month supply that he kindly hauled across the border.) But before Vito began taking it, he consulted Dr. Linda Laubenstein at NYU Medical Center. Dr. Laubenstein warned him that the drug could only block the virus at the daily dosage of 1800 mg, which caused dreadful side effects. Other doctors informed Vito that they had seen wonderful improvements in AIDS patients taking ribavirin at precisely that dosage. He turned to Ron in frustration. “Why all the apparent disparity of belief? Please understand that I’m not being belligerent here. To me and thousands like me this isn’t a research game, it’s a daily emotional battle.” Ron, of course, had no definitive answer to Vito’s questions. He could only offer words of comfort and admiration to a self-taught patient who realized that “sitting around and doing nothing was not an option.”

As Vito bombarded doctors with letters and phone calls, Jeff continued to ignore medical reality. He found hope in the New Age teachings of Louise Hay, who preached that individuals create their own illnesses and find cures through self-love. After a Catskills retreat, Jeff returned to New York and threw away all his medicines. Hefting a trash bag clattering with prescription bottles, he announced, “I don’t need any of this anymore. I’m cured.” In January 1986, he accepted GMHC’s referral to a nutritionist who decided what was “right for his clients [to eat] by holding the item over their stomach and if the client’s arm raise[d], he prescribe[d] the item.” Vito couldn’t toss his eyebrows high enough. “Give me a break here” was his sole reply. To appease Vito, Jeff consulted with Ron once or twice, dutifully recording the carb-, cream-, and vegetable-heavy diet that became his sole weapon against AIDS.

Hoping that Jeff’s beliefs might give him strength, Vito tried to encourage the dietary regimen for as long as he could. But it was becoming harder to reach his lover. Upon discovering his own first KS lesion, Jeff retreated permanently into a fantasy world where he could block out any unpleasant messages. Vito began finding it impossible to spend any time with him. His sense of hopelessness grew
as Jeff spent “most days lying in a dark room staring at the ceiling and generally spout[ing] all sorts of nonsense.” The breaking point had finally come.

Racked with guilt, Vito asked Jeff to leave the apartment on February 1. As Jeff retreated to his parents’ home in Pittsburgh, Vito began seeing a psychotherapist. Two weeks later, he took off for Sydney and Melbourne, where he was presenting the “Closet,” and Honolulu, where he was taking a badly needed vacation. At the same time, Jeff left Pittsburgh for San Francisco. With his health failing, he wanted to return to the city he considered home.

In San Francisco, Jeff went to see Nancy Stoller at SFAF. Startled by his dramatic weight loss, she drove him back to Mary Rose Kent’s apartment, where he was staying. Nancy marveled that in his condition, Jeff could still climb stairs. In fact, he couldn’t. One night, on his way downstairs for a drink of water, he fell. Mary Rose realized that a crisis had been reached and told him he needed a doctor. Jeff replied, “I’m just so afraid that if I go into a hospital, I’ll never come out again.” It was the likeliest scenario, but as his mother and sisters noted, he had surpassed their power to help him. They bundled him up and took him to San Francisco General.

On March 5, knowing that Vito was traveling, Larry Bush left word for Arnie that Jeff was dying of lymphoma. When Arnie called the hospital the next morning, he reached Jeff’s mother, who told him that Jeff was “breathing his last.” When her son’s chest fell for the last time, Mrs. Sevcik turned to Larry and commented, simply, “I guess that’s all there is.” One month shy of his thirty-first birthday, Jeff was gone.

At the moment of Jeff’s death, Vito was high over the Pacific Ocean, flying from Melbourne to Honolulu. Asleep in the cabin, he awoke with a violent start. “V!” Was Jeff calling him? The next morning he arrived in Honolulu, where he met Joe Brewer for lunch. After the meal, they returned to Vito’s room for a nap. Their rest was interrupted by a sharp knock. Bizarrely, the desk clerk was trying to reach Joe for a call. When he picked up the phone, Joe heard the voice of Allen Sawyer asking him to tell Vito that Jeff had just died. Joe crept back to Vito’s room and shared the news. As he did, Joe related, Vito “just came apart. I was holding him, sort of from behind, on top of the bed, and he just sort of leaned forward like a doll—forward—and he just shattered.”

Hours later, Vito was on a flight to San Francisco. Tom Harding picked him up at the airport and drove him directly to San Francisco General, where he was taken to the morgue. An attendant slid out a drawer, and there was Jeff—but to Vito, “it wasn’t. No way was it Jeff. He had that little bump on his nose [laughing] that told me it was Jeff. And I remember that I combed his hair—because he was always doing that . . . I took a comb out of my pocket and I combed his hair and I talked to him for a little while.”
To Vito’s surprise, the Sevciks had left the cremation and disposition of the ashes to him. Jeff’s sisters and elderly parents had no friends or family in San Francisco and nowhere to stay for any length of time. Figuring that Vito and Jeff’s friends would see to a ceremony, they returned home shortly after his death.

With Rob Epstein, his partner Jeffrey Friedman, Allen and Tom, and Larry Bush, Vito climbed a hill high above Jeff’s beloved Castro to strew a portion of his ashes. As he bade good-bye to his golden boy, a strong breeze whipped up out of nowhere and blew some of the ashes back in the mourners’ faces. Larry remembers someone remarking, “That’s the one way you know you’re gonna cry for Jeffrey.” The comment wasn’t intended maliciously, Larry insists; it was merely emotional fallout among a group of friends, mostly under forty, who had already seen an impossible number of deaths.

When Vito returned to New York on March 11, Arnie met him at his apartment. From his suitcase, Vito drew a small canister with the balance of Jeff’s ashes. As Arnie took a respectful glance inside, Vito began picking at his scalp. “‘It’s [Jeff’s] ashes,’ he said. ‘It was very windy while we were strewing them and I didn’t have a chance to take a shower’” before leaving San Francisco.

Arnie could only hold his friend and let him cry. Death had followed Vito back to New York, which itself was becoming a citywide graveyard.