Celluloid Activist
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Afterword

Vito often ended his *GAT* and *Advocate* columns with “Still Shots,” gossipy snippets patterned after the Hollywood tabloids of his youth. In his memory, I conclude *Celluloid Activist* in the same fashion.

Hours before Vito’s death, Jesse Helms was elected to his third term in the U.S. Senate. Friends joked that Vito would have been only too happy to miss the returns.

On the morning of November 7, Charlie drove to Blueridge Road to tell his parents that Vito was gone. Annie opened the door, saw her son’s stricken face, and blurted, “I’ll come with you to the hospital today.”

The following week, the Bergen *Record* published Annie’s letter to the editor. “A better son my husband and I could never find,” she wrote. “I have a hole in my heart that cannot be mended.” In her grief, Annie adopted Vito’s political fury. “I lost the love of my life through neglect, homophobia, and hatred, from the lack of love and compassion of doctors and Jesse Helms.”

Obituaries appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, and gay newspapers and magazines across the United States.

Vito was cremated on November 8. The following day, Bill Johnson presided over a “Celebration of the Life and Love of Vito Anthony Russo” at the Rutherford Congregational Church in Rutherford, New Jersey. Bill, Arnie, Vicki, and Charlie offered tributes. Arnie wore a button that read “I Love Vito.” Annie’s proclaimed “Silence=Death.”
At his home in Los Angeles, Craig Zadan hosted a massive memorial for Vito’s Hollywood friends. Shortly before Vito’s death, Craig asked him why he had never pushed him toward gay activism as he had so many others. Vito smiled and replied that Craig would contribute in his own way and time. With producing partner Neil Meron, Craig went on to helm the lesbian and gay-themed television movies *Serving in Silence: The Margarethe Cammermeyer Story* (1995), *What Makes a Family* (2001), and *Wedding Wars* (2006). He took on these films for Vito. “I made them because he would be proud of me.”

Shortly after dawn on December 2, 1990, several of Vito’s friends climbed to a hilltop above the Castro to scatter his ashes where Jeffrey’s had vanished nearly five years earlier. They then strolled down to the Castro Theatre, where hundreds were gathered for a memorial service organized by Rob Epstein and Frameline director Michael Lumpkin. Eloquent eulogies from Nancy Stoller and Joe Brewer cushioned campy clips from *The Killing of Sister George* and *Caged*. Mourners saw Vito with Bette Midler at the 1973 Gay Pride Gala in Washington Square, and with Lily Tomlin, à la Mrs. Beasley, in *Our Time* clips. Thelma Ritter honked through a *Pick Up on South Street* monologue, Judy Garland soared “Over the Rainbow,” and, in a tribute to Jeff, Ethel Waters cooed “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” As directed in Vito’s will, Baby Jane Dexter sang Phil Ochs’s mournful “When I’m Gone” before slamming “Forever Young” through the far balcony wall—into which Allen Sawyer and Jeffrey Friedman had stashed a small portion of Vito’s ashes so that he could watch movies in perpetuity.

At the Castro, Baby Jane was flabbergasted to be approached by Bhavo Michael (Bruce Parker), whom she hadn’t seen since his break-up with Vito fourteen years earlier. The pair reminisced about their departed friend and old times. Baby Jane didn’t realize that Bhavo also had AIDS. After battling the illness for over fifteen years, he died of lung cancer on September 15, 2000.

Vito’s New York memorial took place on Thursday, December 20, at Cooper Union’s Great Hall. Arnie served as emcee on the same stage that had been trod by Presidents Lincoln, Grant, Cleveland, Roosevelt (Theodore), Taft, and Wilson. Vito had attended and inspired many an ACT UP meeting there. The capacity audience witnessed much of the same program that had played at the Castro—with one key exception. Larry Kramer took the stage to scream, “We killed Vito. As sure as any virus killed him, we killed him. Everyone in this room killed him. Twenty-five million [gay men and lesbians] outside this room killed him.” No one, he argued, had done enough to fight an epidemic that would never have happened had gays and lesbians been more insistent about their rights.
Reaction to Larry’s screed was (and remains) sharply divided. Many people present, who had been fighting AIDS since its earliest days, felt attacked. They had devoted their lives to agitating for research, more drugs, education, better care for the sick. How dare Larry accuse them of “killing” Vito? (There are also those who insist that Larry said, “You killed Vito,” not “We killed Vito,” as in the speech’s published version.) In addition, Vito’s aggrieved family sat at Larry’s feet; it was in unspeakable taste that he had included them in his roster of murderers.

But Larry also had his defenders. The speech was exactly what everyone expected from him: an in-your-face, over-the-top shriek that contained at least a kernel of truth. More than one person present has remarked that while they hated the speech, they were sure Vito would have loved it. Larry himself claims that he discussed the eulogy with Vito shortly before his death. Livid at those who weren’t actively fighting AIDS, Vito approved Larry’s tribute to him.

On the day of the New York memorial, Beryl Normand strolled down Christopher Street past the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop. On an adjacent wall, someone had spray painted “VITO” in six-foot letters. She realized that the gay community “had lost one of their elders, one of their great tribal leaders.”

In September 1991, Arnie took the ferry from Sayville, Long Island, out to Fire Island. Along with Larry Mass, Jim Owles, Charlie, and other Russo and Salerno relatives, he scattered a portion of Vito’s ashes into the surf. He has not returned to Fire Island since.

Early in 1992, Jim descended into dementia. Toxoplasmosis ravaged his brain, leaving him paranoid and delusional. Arnie watched helplessly as his other best friend succumbed to AIDS on August 6, 1993. To this day, Arnie wears the gold “Lambda” ring given to Jim during his tenure as GAA’s first president.

Gay Pride marches have been hard on Arnie since Vito and Jim died. At the 1994 festivities, marking Stonewall’s twenty-fifth anniversary, he wailed with grief for his departed friends. In June 2009, I stood with Arnie and thousands of others on lower 5th Avenue as the deafening arrival of Dykes on Bikes announced the start of the Stonewall 40 procession. He turned to me with tears in his eyes and gestured up the avenue at the barrage of floats awaiting their turn. “I still think about the first march in 1970 and wonder what Vito and Jim would have made of all this.” From behind, I slipped my arms around his chest and held him. After a moment, he relaxed and smiled.
Institutional tributes to Vito began pouring in soon after his death. In late May 1991, UCSC dedicated the “Vito Russo House,” an apartment building reserved for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. One week later, New York’s Lesbian and Gay Community Center inaugurated the Pat Parker/Vito Russo Library, the nation’s first gay lending library. That June, the New York International Festival of Lesbian and Gay Film was dedicated in Vito’s memory, and in 1994, Los Angeles held the Vito Russo Lesbian & Gay Film Festival. In 1999, GLAAD instituted the Vito Russo Award, given annually to a figure who has excelled in battling homophobia. Recipients have included performers RuPaul, Nathan Lane, Rosie O’Donnell, Cherry Jones, Alan Cumming, and Cynthia Nixon, photographer David LaChapelle, fashion designer Tom Ford, and financial whiz Suze Orman.

Vito’s family has honored his legacy as well. Nephew Charlie began college at UCSC, where his first class met in Oakes 105—the very room where Vito taught The Celluloid Closet. Niece Leslie became a writer and eventually ended up on the staff of *Glamour* magazine, where she founded the film series “Reel Moments.” Each year, readers submit stories about women’s lives; three entries are adapted into short films directed by the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Demi Moore, and Jennifer Aniston. Annie always said that Leslie would follow in Uncle Vito’s footsteps.

For years, Vito’s most important legacy seemed in danger of oblivion. Without funding, the film version of *Celluloid Closet* languished. Following the success of *Common Threads*, Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman were able to secure backing from Channel Four in England, followed by ZDF in Germany, Hugh Hefner, and, finally, HBO. But they knew that the cost of clip rights could run into the millions, far greater than any amount they could hope to raise. They turned to Howard Rosenman for help.

Howard was friendly with studio heads all over Hollywood. Reeling with AIDS grief, he was furious that money problems might prevent Vito’s lifework from reaching the screen. He charged into Sid Sheinberg’s office at Universal and explained the project. “I said to him, ‘I need these clips and I need them for nothing.’ And he just said, ‘OK, they’re yours.’” Mike Medavoy of Orion and Tri-Star Pictures quickly jumped on board, as did Ned Tanen at Paramount. Only Samuel Goldwyn balked when Howard asked for clips from *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952), shrilly proclaiming of the film’s star, “My friend Danny Kaye was not gay!”

Times had changed since the seventies, when only a few actors would consent to speak with Vito. In a more progressive era, and with the impetus of Rob’s two
Oscars and Howard’s industry clout, stars were now much more willing to discuss playing gays or lesbians on film. Tony Curtis, Harvey Fierstein, Whoopi Goldberg, Farley Granger, Harry Hamlin, Tom Hanks, and Susan Sarandon all signed on, as did writers Jay Presson Allen (*Cabaret*), Quentin Crisp, Mart Crowley, Richard Dyer, Armistead Maupin, Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey* [1995]), and Gore Vidal. Shirley MacLaine—to whom Vito penned his last published lines in a plea for an interview—finally consented to discuss *The Children’s Hour*. Cher agreed to talk about *Silkwood* but never showed up. Barbra Streisand refused the invitation altogether. Charlton Heston, approached for permission to use his image as Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965), had a meltdown. To Howard, he grandly and rather oddly proclaimed that he “knew Buonaroti; he was not gay.” To Rob and Jeffrey, Heston sent a more specific argument: he “knew for a fact” that Michelangelo “wasn’t a homosexual but only a misanthrope who cared about nothing but carving marble.” The letter still hangs framed on Rob and Jeffrey’s office wall. Determined to hang the “pretentious motherfucker,” Howard secured homoerotic clips from Heston’s Oscar-winning performance in *Ben-Hur* (1959), their overripe subtext acidly elucidated by screenwriter Gore Vidal.

With clips and interviews in place, Rob and Jeffrey hired Armistead Maupin to write the film’s narration, which drew on the book’s structure and examples but omitted much of its anger. The process went smoothly until the directors began pursuing Lily Tomlin to narrate. Armistead reeled at the irony of naming a star who hadn’t declared her lesbianism *The Celluloid Closet*’s official voice. Lily had her own misgivings. She agreed with Armistead that she wasn’t “out enough” for the project, and she thought her voice totally wrong: “I narrate horribly. I mean, I become absolutely Detroit. It’s so flat and unattractive.” But in Vito’s memory, she lent her name and her talents to the film.

Armistead went after Lily in Michael Musto’s *Village Voice* column and ended up being barred from the opening-night party at the Castro Theatre.

Lily came out in 2000.

When *The Celluloid Closet* premiered in 1995, it attracted its share of criticism. Yes, the film was funny, infuriating, heartbreaking—just like the book—but it was also too Hollywood-focused, too big-budget-obsessed, just like the book. It dropped a nod to New Queer Cinema (*Poison* [1991], *Swoon* [1992], *The Living End* [1992]), but for the most part, it was confined to major studio releases, up through *Philadelphia* (1993). What about experimental film? What about Vito’s anger? For that matter, what about Vito himself? Many who remembered his
lectures couldn’t accept the idea of watching his clips without his voice to string them together.

On the night of October 13, the New York Film Festival audience at Lincoln Center seemed not to share these reservations. Cheers drowned out Rob and Jeffrey as they summarized Vito’s career. Before the screening began, the directors brought up the house lights, pointed at the box where the Russos were seated, and announced that it was Annie’s seventy-third birthday.

The audience erupted in screams of appreciation. Annie lost her balance as the throng shouted up at her, “Thank you for giving us Vito!”

When the film ended, the Russos slowly made their way downstairs and out to the streets where Annie had roamed as a girl. The echoes of k.d. lang’s “Secret Love,” played over the closing credits, remained with Vito’s mother long after she left the theater.