

# So Many Alternatives

## THE ALTERNATIVE AIDS VIDEO MOVEMENT

by Alexandra Juhasz

In our last issue, videomaker, media activist, and author Alexandra Juhasz introduced the alternative AIDS film and video movement, one made up of independent producers who often have close links to the communities at risk and, in some cases, are themselves HIV-positive or PWAs. In that introductory article—like the one that follows, an excerpt from her forthcoming book, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video*—she discussed the work of the Audio-Visual Department of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, The New York City Commission on Human Rights AIDS Discrimination Unit, the independent documentary *The Heart of the Matter*, and the *Testing the Limits* and *DIVA TV* production groups. In the concluding installment below, Juhasz examines the efforts of other noteworthy producers of alternative AIDS media.

### Tom Kalin

The film and video artist Tom Kalin has made at least eight videotapes and films about AIDS since 1985, although he believes that all of his work (including, for instance, his feature film, *Swoon*—see *Cineaste*, Vol. XIX, No. 3) is impacted by the crisis. His AIDS work has been financed, produced, and distributed in a variety of ways—from personally funded, individually produced montage-based experimental “art tapes” to collectively produced, glossy television. Kalin believes that he combines two models of the artist-as-producer: the “heroic artist,” who gives form to the issues and feelings of his own personal/political landscape, and the “collaborative activist” whose work reflects a collective interpretation of experience and ideology.

Kalin's first AIDS tape, *Like Little Soldiers* (made while completing his MFA at the Institute for the Arts in Chicago), marks his initial response to AIDS—a personal and profound fear untempered by any interest in organizing or politicizing with others. The tape inter-

cuts the brutal image of a pair of hands washing and picking off the white and then brown paint which color them, with the image of a burning shirt. In 1987, Kalin together with Stathis Lagoudikis produced *News From Home*, which renders the anxiety of disclosure of sero-status within a relationship and the society at large.

Kalin's search for and move towards a community represents a second stage in his AIDS work. His 1988 production, *they are lost to vision altogether*, reflects his move to New York and exposure to the activist politics of ACT UP. The tape strings together found and stolen footage from TV, movies, re-shot television, and Kalin's own images of sexuality, history, and activism, into a rapid and disorienting montage juxtaposing mass media hysteria with individual fixation, desire, and fear.

Until 1991 Kalin also produced work with the ACT UP artists' affinity group, *GranFury*. In 1990 the group produced *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which consists of four thirty-second public service announcements about AIDS. These Benneton-like advertisements for racial and sexual diversity in the face of AIDS all emphasize the group's belief that, although culture is made in a lot of places, the mainstream media sets the global and national agenda about AIDS. Therefore, to reach people and to reach for change, it is necessary to

speak to people where they listen and in a language they understand. Kalin insists that “the ideal distribution” for even alternative AIDS video is television, “plop in the middle of the market place. You need to work to engage in the politics of Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Benneton. There is no outside the market place in relation to art production—the best you can do is to tease its margins.”

Kalin makes tapes for ghosts—the people he's lost to AIDS, the faces he's seen on city streets or at AIDS demonstrations. “I don't have anything more to say about AIDS than the proverbial Latina mother of two infected babies who is also sick herself. But I do have cultural access, entitlement, privilege.” Kalin uses his privilege like an artist, like an AIDS activist. He represents what he knows and how he lives in a mass-mediated society which is unaware that it is dripping with infection, and unaware of Kalin's grief and anger unless he represents it.

### Juanita Mohammed

Juanita Mohammed has made several AIDS tapes, beginning with her involvement in 1990 with WAVE, The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise (one of the several alternative AIDS video projects which I have produced since 1987). WAVE was an innovative AIDS educational video project designed to empower women in the communities disproportionately affected

by AIDS (urban, low-income, women of color) to produce their own educational media. Within the structure of a long-term AIDS support group, several women including Mohammed and myself discussed AIDS, the media, and video production, eventually producing the much-distributed tape *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*. This project brought Mohammed's interests in film production together with her expertise as a volunteer and her passion for AIDS education and pre-



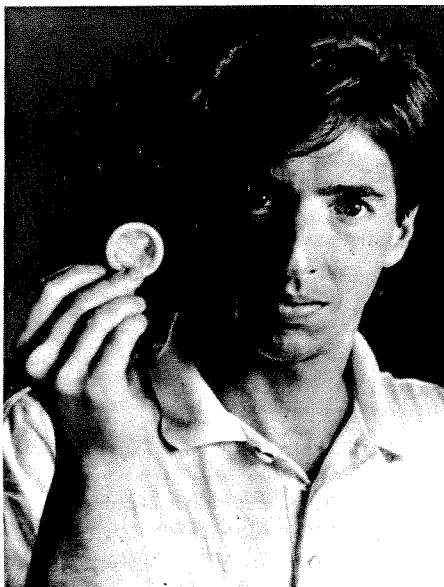
A scene from the AIDS Films production, *Seriously Fresh*, an AIDS prevention film aimed at the African-American audience.

vention. She went on to produce *Homosexuality: One Child's Point of View* with her eleven year-old daughter Jahanara, and is currently working on a theater-video project with a group of six gay black men. During this project, Mohammed met Tyrone Ayers, who she taught to use a camcorder, and who later shot her video *Words to Live By*.

In 1992, Mohammed was hired on a free-lance basis by the Gay Men Health Crisis's Audio-Visual Department where she now works full time as the Assistant Coordinator. Among other things, Mohammed produces the "Caring" segment of the show—short sequences which highlight the experiences, struggles, and issues of care givers of PWAs. She has produced fifteen segments since she began with the agency. Mohammed's favorite "Caring" segments are *Two Men and a Baby* (which focuses on a black gay couple who are in the process of adopting the HIV-positive son of a sister of one of the men), and *Part of Me* (coproduced with Alisa Lebow, which tells the story of Lilly Gonzalez, a Latina lesbian with AIDS who is an ex-IV drug-user turned AIDS educator). These short tapes feature long-take, extremely intimate, talking-head interviews with a wide variety of speakers.

Mohammed was also in charge of production of *Words to Live By*, an AIDS educational tape by and for teenagers. Funded with \$2,500 from the Board of Education, the tape chronicles the work of teenagers at a special high school (Youth Dares) who are trained to become AIDS peer educators. After paying \$500 to the student participants, Mohammed shot and edited the tape using the assistance of videomakers like Lebow and Ayers and the equipment of GMHC and DCTV. Due to bureaucratic slip-ups, the commitment level of their teenage participants, and the interference of school employees, Mohammed shot the tape over only seven days, partly during school time, partly on weekends. This resulted in extremely diverse footage, dependent upon peoples' moods and energy.

Mohammed believes the tape will be effective education because it "feels like teens really made it. It's more personal than the work that comes from adults for teens. They make mistakes and correct themselves. It looks like every day; it's not lit perfectly. But kids watching it will identify. They'll know those are real kids." The tape relies mainly upon scripted and talking-head interviews with the teen educators who worked on it who share their personal thoughts about HIV, safer sex, and AIDS education. These raw statements are intercut with role plays: one, called "Under Pressure," focuses upon a



Ron Reagan demonstrates proper condom use in the controversial AIDSFilms production, *AIDS: Changing the Rules*.

boy discussing with a female friend how to say no to a pushy lover, and the other, "What If She Says No," enacts what occurs when a girl takes on the power to resist unwanted sex. According to Mohammed, it is the "real" feeling of this tape—signified by its lack of expertise, professional anchors, or high-end video equipment—that will make the tape effective education.

## AIDSFilms

AIDSFilms has produced six educational, fictionalized, "behavior-modeling" films about AIDS since its founding in 1985 by free-lance film producer John Hoffman, Frank Getchell of the Children's Television Workshop, and Dr. Susan Tross from the Narcotic and Drug Research Institute: *AIDS: Changing the Rules* (1987); *Seriously Fresh* (Reggie Life, 1988-89); *Are You With Me?* (M. Neema Barnette, 1988-89); *Vida* (Lourdes Portillo, 1988-89); *Reunion* (Jamal Joseph and Laverne Berry, 1992); and *Party!* (Charles Sessoms and Laverne Berry, 1993). An independent and nonprofit production company, AIDSFilms produces high-end, glossy, expensive, and massively distributed programs. Says Hoffman: "We use the visual vocabulary that the audience is accustomed to. We believe that they trust messages that are delivered in a high quality, professional, stylish way." Perhaps because of this high level of professionalism, in 1993 they were awarded a million-dollar plus grant from ITVS to produce *HIV Weekly*, nine half-hour, magazine-format television programs by and for the AIDS community.

A volunteer for GMHC in 1985, Hoffman wanted to contribute more effectively by using his skills as a filmmaker.

Research for this project led Hoffman and another filmmaker friend, Getchell, to Tross, who was conducting a psychiatric study of gay men in attempts to learn about effective strategies for coping with HIV. Much of the team's educational and production philosophies came from her ideas of "dramatic modeling," using actors to model the behavior change that the audience is intended to effect.

Hoffman explains, "This period was about public relations, studying how one presents oneself in the philanthropic community to gain interest and support and trust." In December 1986, AIDSFilms gained initial financial support from WETA, the PBS affiliate in Washington, D.C. Subsequent grants and fundraising, including \$55,000 from a gala evening benefit featuring an Alvin Ailey performance, were applied toward producing *AIDS: Changing the Rules*, a film designed to educate sexually active, straight adults about AIDS risk and prevention.

The film aired on PBS in November 1987 to a media blitz which revolved around two issues: their use of Ronald Reagan, Jr. as a host, and their use of a banana to demonstrate condom application, a strategy which had been highly criticized by the banana industry. The film's sponsors, Schmidt Laboratories (manufacturers of Ramses condoms, used throughout the film) also contributed another \$100,000 for the right to distribute 20,000 copies of the film as promotion for their product. With such support, the group incorporated into a nonprofit company which raised over a million dollars in the following two years for production and distribution. Hoffman became executive director, and Tom Kalin was hired as Production Assistant.

By far the most consistently and highly-funded alternative AIDS media organization, AIDSFilms is also noteworthy for their concerted effort to diversify their product and producers in the late Eighties and early Nineties. They understood the crisis was escalating most dramatically within black and Latino urban communities, and that there was little media education targeted at these groups. They wondered how a company made up almost entirely of affluent white professionals could reach, educate, and represent a community that was not their own.

By all accounts this was "a painful, awkward, confusing, and difficult" process, which has itself been closely and carefully evaluated in a Ford Foundation-funded study entitled *Retooling for Diversity* (written by Renee Tajima and Ernesto de la Vega). The study details this nonprofit's attempt to complete "a critical phase in multicultural, multiracial organi-

zational development from which other nonprofits might learn." This process engendered a new production phase for the company: utilizing advisory committees composed of people from the communities who were targeted for education, and demonstrating a commitment "to a filmmaking process where people of color are fully involved creatively and technically at every level of filmmaking from research, to scripting, production, editing and distribution." But the study is not clear if AIDS Films effectively formed "a multi-cultural organization." The report ends: "Significantly, all three of the people of color on the Executive Committee have resigned from their positions, for various reasons."

These important difficulties withstanding, during their tenure the new Executive Committee did produce three very well-received films for targeted audiences (black, urban boys in *Seriously Fresh*, black women in *Are You With Me?*, and Latinas in *Vida*), all written, produced, and conceived by professionals from the target communities.

The stories occur within a familial situation (a single, black mother, her daughter and boyfriend, a single Latina grandmother, mother and daughter, three generations of a middle class black family in *Reunion*), itself embedded in a close-knit community or extended family. Focusing, soap-opera style, upon discussions about AIDS within interpersonal relationships, the films evoke the idioms, fashions, attitudes, and environments of the communities they attempt to represent and educate. All five of AIDS Films' shorts are narrative films which look and feel a great deal like mainstream TV, diverging from this model only in the communities (urban people of color) and issues (AIDS education) represented.

### James Wentzy/DIVA TV 2/ AIDS Community Television

*AIDS Community Television*, a half-hour public access show devoted to programming "for greater advocacy, coalition building, and greater public awareness of AIDS activism" first went on the air on January 1, 1993. There are twelve airing times monthly in all five boroughs of New York, and many of the shows have been aired by ACT UP affiliates across the country. Since its second inception, the new DIVA TV (James Wentzy) has produced over twenty shows including *AIDS Community Television: Introduction to AIDS Video Activism* (Jan. 5, 1993), *Target Bush: Last Night in Office* (Jan. 9, 1993), and *Tim Bailey Political Funeral Washington* (July 6, 1993). That's one show a week, without a break, for over twelve



A scene from James Wentzy's production of *Tim Bailey Political Funeral Washington*.

months and counting: 101 shows as of December 5, 1994. Wentzy's raw, angry and thorough coverage consists entirely of long and unedited shots—as if you are there—usually intercut with interviews of activist participants who contextualize or critique the event covered.

DIVA TV, the media affinity group of ACT UP, was defunct for a variety of personal, structural, and historical reasons when James Wentzy, who had joined ACT UP in 1990, reenergized it with the goal of commencing a weekly AIDS activist cable show. With his Hi8 camera, and no experience editing or producing video, Wentzy produced *Day of Desperation*, which documented the first ACT UP action he attended. A slow accumulation of grants (approximately \$17,000 since 1992) has allowed DIVA to purchase a 3/4" off-line editing system, currently housed in Wentzy's living room.

Wentzy claims he has documented ninety-five percent of ACT UP/NY's demonstrations since his reconstitution of DIVA. "The weekly show is my life. If you want to know how I'm doing, tune into Manhattan Public Access Tuesdays at 11:00 p.m. or Fridays at 9:00 a.m." Wentzy's new goal is a national media network devoted to reflecting the "struggles, needs, and state of mind" of people affected by AIDS. He believes his TV coverage of the AIDS crisis has an activist perspective. "It's the only weekly series in the world devoted to covering AIDS activism, and it's political. All activists see the crisis as a political problem." On the other hand, he sees that "the nature of the broadcast media is that it is fleeting, with so little chance for perspective or evaluation."

It is telling that the first action Wentzy documented was the last action covered by *Testing the Limits*. Wentzy is in effect a third wave AIDS video activist in a movement that has had only a six-year long history: re-creating a wheel only four years after the first AIDS cable show on the air (GMHC), three years after the first video collective devoted to covering AIDS activism was formed (*Testing the Limits*), and two years after a group was formed as

an arm of ACT UP (the original DIVA TV).

Meanwhile, other individuals and organizations (from high-power organizations like AIDS Films and the New York Commission on Human Rights to individual artists and activists like Tom Kalin or Juanita Mohammed) have been using both high and low end video to educate diverse communities (gay teenagers, urban communities of color, artists, PWAs, careproviders of PWAs, the "home viewer" of broadcast TV) about safer sex, the interpersonal, physical, and emotional consequences of HIV-infection and the politics of the representation of AIDS.

After having concentrated here, and in the initial portion of this article in the previous issue, upon the production histories of eight diverse alternative projects (and having made many such alternative tapes myself), one conclusion about this work rises above the expected remarks upon the similarities of commitment, struggle, and ideology which set apart the alternative AIDS media.

Into the second decade of the AIDS crisis, and nearing ten years and tens of hundreds of alternative AIDS video projects, what I see is a crisis of multiple perspectives, diverse dimensions, countless communities, and limitless personalities and a response, in video, which attempts to take this web into account. There are "so many alternatives" because a complex and mutating social crisis needs as many responses as there are forms in which to respond.

As is evidenced in the projects above, mediamakers come to AIDS with camcorders and 16mm cameras, with their sights on national TV and individual video monitors, and with political inclinations which range from the left to center to apolitical. And it is precisely this feature of the alternative AIDS media, as opposed to the bounded and closed nature of so much mainstream television, which I celebrate and applaud: a forum as rich, open, and malleable as are the individuals and communities who have been scarred and scared into action against AIDS and the cultural and political indifference it has continued to breed. ■

### Distribution Sources

Tom Kalin's early videos are distributed by Drift Releasing, 611 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, phone (212) 254-4118.

Juanita Mohammed, c/o Gay Men's Health Crisis Audio-Visual Department, 129 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, phone (212) 807-7517.

AIDS Films, 75 Spring Street, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10012, phone (212) 219-8660.

James Wentzy/DIVA TV2/AIDS Community Television, 12 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10013, phone (212) 226-8147.