



Epstein, Rob (b. 1955)

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Rob Epstein. Image courtesy tellingpictures.com.

Writer, director, and producer Rob Epstein is one of the most accomplished filmmakers working today. He has been involved in the creation of such groundbreaking and critically-acclaimed glbtq documentaries as *Word Is Out*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Common Threads*, *The Celluloid Closet*, and *Paragraph 175*, as well as the full-length feature film *Howl*.

Epstein was born on April 6, 1955, in New Jersey.

His filmmaking career began when, as a 19-year-old college dropout, he responded to an ad in a San Francisco weekly alternative newspaper for "a non-sexist person to work on a documentary film on gay life."

That documentary would ultimately become the landmark film *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, released in 1977.

The project was initiated five years earlier by the visionary documentarian Peter Adair (1943-1996) who began to film interviews with his friends about their experiences as gay men and women. Realizing these interviews could be expanded into a full-length documentary, Adair brought his sister Nancy into the project, along with four other filmmakers, including Epstein. All six members of the team ultimately shared directing credit as the Mariposa Film Group.

In total, over 200 interviews were conducted; eventually, the filmmakers narrowed the focus of the documentary to twenty-six people, ranging in ages from 18 to 77, and encompassing a wide range of life experiences. The conversations were divided into three broad topics--recollections of hard times past, coming-out stories, and hopes for the future--with an emphasis on personal experiences rather than political ideologies. The resulting interviews were then interwoven to create a rich tapestry of gay and lesbian life in the United States.

Word Is Out premiered at the Castro Theatre in the heart of San Francisco's gay neighborhood in November 1977. The documentary received enthusiastic reviews for its realistic and honest depictions of gay people.

The documentary was also broadcast in 1978 on several local Public Broadcasting (PBS) television stations.

Within months of its debut, the Mariposa Film Group began receiving thousands of letters from gay men and women thanking the directors for making such a courageous film, and in some cases, crediting *Word Is Out* for saving their lives simply by showing positive images of homosexuals in stark contrast to the negative stereotypes then prevalent in mainstream entertainment.

In 2008, the UCLA Film & Television Archive and the Outfest Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation undertook a restoration of the original 16-millimeter color negatives and audio recordings. The restored version again premiered at the Castro Theatre in June 2008 as part of the Frameline Film Festival and a DVD was released with updates on the cast and filmmakers.

Upon the film's re-release, the critic Melissa Anderson noted in *The Village Voice* that the film "was a revelation 32 years ago and still enormously powerful today."

Epstein's next project was the 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, which he directed, as well as co-wrote (with Judith Coburn and Carter Wilson) and co-produced (with Richard Schmiechen).

The documentary focuses on the charismatic and savvy Harvey Milk, self-proclaimed "Mayor of Castro Street," who became the first openly gay man to be elected to a public office in the United States when he successfully won a seat on San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in 1977.

Epstein originally had planned to focus his film on Proposition 6, also known as the Briggs Initiative, a referendum that would have banned gay men and lesbians from teaching in California public schools, and Milk's tireless involvement in its ultimate defeat.

However, only eleven months into Milk's term, and while Epstein was still in the research phase of the project, Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were shot to death in City Hall by former Supervisor Dan White. White was later convicted of manslaughter and received a scant seven-year sentence, an outrage that sparked riots throughout the city.

Epstein promptly decided to expand the project into a full-length documentary about Milk himself.

Narrated by the actor Harvey Fierstein, the documentary comprises television news footage sketching the political careers of Milk, Moscone, and White, intercut with personal reflections of several of Milk's friends and colleagues, including a union leader who admits that he was prejudiced against homosexuals for a long time, and even condoned violence against them, until he met Milk who helped break down his preconceptions.

The Times of Harvey Milk won the 1985 Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, as well as the New York Film Critics Award for Best Non-Fiction Film, and was named one of the best documentaries of the 1980s by *American Film* magazine.

The UCLA Film & Television Archive and the Sundance Institute later selected the film as a preservation project and a 35-millimeter digitally re-mastered version of the film was released in June 2000.

Epstein next produced and directed (with Peter Adair) the PBS documentary, *The AIDS Show: Artists Involved with Death and Survival* (1986). The film documents the making of "The AIDS Show," a collaboratively-written theater piece that examined the emotional impact of AIDS from multiple points of view, which was first produced in September 1984 by San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros.

In 1987, Epstein teamed up with filmmaker Jeffrey Friedman (who had served as a consultant on *The Times of Harvey Milk*) to form the production company Telling Pictures in a former convent and Catholic girls' school in San Francisco.

The first Telling Pictures project was the 1989 documentary *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, which Epstein and Friedman together wrote, produced, directed, and edited.

Narrated by the actor Dustin Hoffman, the film was inspired by the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a community artwork to commemorate the lives of those who have died of AIDS-related causes. Combining archival footage with personal reminiscences, the film recounts the first decade of AIDS in the United States, focusing on five people memorialized by panels in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, including three gay men,

as well as a young hemophiliac and an intravenous drug user.

Epstein won his second Academy Award when *Common Threads* was named the best feature-length documentary in 1990; the film also won the Interfilm Award at the 1990 Berlin International Film Festival. The film made its television debut on Home Box Office (HBO), for which it won a 1989 George Foster Peabody Award for Excellence in Television and a 1990 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding TV Documentary.

As a change of pace, in May 1991, Epstein and Friedman set out in a mini-van with a small camera crew and without any particular itinerary. They traveled for eighteen days through the southern United States, stopping in cities and small towns and interviewing people they met along the way, including a group of gay Marines.

Those interviews, along with footage of their journey, form the core of *Where Are We? Our Trip Through America*, a documentary that explores the aspirations and anxieties of a cross-section of everyday working-class Americans. The film premiered at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where it was nominated for a Grand Jury Prize, and was later broadcast on many local PBS television stations.

Epstein and Friedman next produced and directed the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), based on Vito Russo's pioneering 1981 book *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. Russo had originally collaborated with the filmmakers on the project in the mid-1980s, but died in 1990, from AIDS-related complications, before financing could be secured to complete the project.

Incorporating a surprising collection of well-chosen clips from approximately 120 films across 100 years of cinema history, beginning with two men dancing in a Thomas Edison experimental short titled "The Gay Brothers" from 1895, *The Celluloid Closet* presents a comprehensive overview of how gay men and women have been portrayed--generally negatively--in American movies.

The actress Lily Tomlin provides a voiceover narration, written by the novelist Armistead Maupin, while a wide-range of Hollywood insiders, such as Tony Curtis, Gore Vidal, and Whoopi Goldberg, contribute behind-the-scenes commentary.

The documentary had its world premiere at the 1995 Venice Film Festival. It received a Freedom of Expression Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1996 and was broadcast on HBO, for which it received a Peabody Award for Excellence in Television and an Emmy Award for Best Direction from the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

Tom Shales, writing in *The Washington Post*, called *The Celluloid Closet* a "film that presses more emotional buttons than many a manipulative melodrama and seems of equal interest to those of every conceivable sexual identity. It's not only about how people see each other and see themselves; it's also about being human and the joy and pain and confusion that strange condition entails."

In 2000, the documentary *Paragraph 175* was released, which Epstein and Friedman again produced and directed. The title of the documentary refers to the national German law prohibiting sex between men incorporated into the German penal code in 1871. Some 60 years later, when the Nazis rose to power, it was expanded to punish a broad range of "lewd and lascivious" behavior between men.

Historian Klaus Müller, a project director for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., initiated the documentary; he had been researching the persecution of homosexuals under Germany's Third Reich. Müller also serves as an interviewer in the film.

Incorporating new and archival film, family photographs, and narration by the actor Rupert Everett, *Paragraph 175* begins in the pre-Nazi era of the Weimar Republic when German gay men and women lived relatively open lives and Berlin was known as the center of homosexual life in Europe.

However, many conservative leaders, including those within the burgeoning Nazi party, regarded the Weimar Republic's tolerance of homosexuality as a sign of Germany's escalating decadence and dishonor.

Consequently, between 1933, when Hitler assumed power, and 1945, with the dissolution of the Nazi government, approximately 100,000 men were arrested for homosexuality under Paragraph 175. About one-half of those men were sentenced by the courts and spent time in regular prisons; additionally, 5,000 to 15,000 were sent directly to concentration camps. Once in the camps, official records suggest, homosexual men had extremely high death rates due to overwork, starvation, physical brutality, or outright murder.

At the end of World War II, only about 4,000 homosexual prisoners in the camps had survived. Six of those survivors appear in the documentary and tell their stories of gay life under Nazi rule. A Jewish lesbian who escaped to England with the help of her lover is also interviewed in the film.

Paragraph 175 had its U.S. premier at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival, where it was awarded the Documentary Jury Prize for directing. It received its European premiere at the 2000 Berlin International Film Festival and won the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Award for "uncovering amazing stories of courage buried by history."

In 2010, Epstein and Friedman released their first scripted full-length feature, *Howl*, which they co-wrote, produced, and directed.

Shot in only fourteen days, *Howl* explores the life of the American poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and the creation of his visionary epic poem by the same name. James Franco stars as Ginsberg, with Aaron Tveit as his lover, Peter Orlovsky (1933-2010).

Epstein and Friedman utilize a multi-layered, non-linear narrative technique that echoes the collage style Ginsberg himself employed in the poem.

The film interweaves five distinct narrative threads, or time frames: 1) a re-imagined interview Ginsberg gave to a *Time* magazine reporter that was never published about the emotional and artistic process that led to the creation of the poem; 2) flashbacks from Ginsberg's early life; 3) his triumphant first public performance of the poem on October 7, 1955 at the Six Gallery, a small art gallery in San Francisco; 4) the infamous 1957 obscenity trial of the poem, in which a San Francisco prosecutor charged that it contained "filth, vulgar, obscene, and disgusting language," most notably for its frank depictions of homosexuality; and 5) sections of the poem itself, as animated by the graphic novelist and Ginsberg collaborator Eric Drooker.

Although it received mixed reviews, David Edelstein, the film critic for *New York* magazine, called *Howl*, "an exhilarating tribute from one form (cinema) to another (poetry). . . . You could call it a deconstruction except that sounds too formal. It's a celebration, an analysis, a critical essay, an ode."

The film premiered at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival where it was nominated for a Grand Jury Prize. It later received the 2010 Freedom of Expression Award from the National Board of Review.

Epstein has also produced and directed works specifically for television, often in collaboration with Friedman, including an episode for the 10-part mini-series *Gold Rush* (2006) and the documentary *Sex in '69: The Sexual Revolution in America* (2009) for The History Channel; seven episodes for the prime-time series *Crime & Punishment* (2002-2004) for NBC; the documentary special *Xtreme: Sports To Die For* (1999) for HBO's *America Undercover* and several segments for HBO's *Real Sex* (1996-1998); three short erotic films for the Playboy Channel in 1990; and assorted news segments for ABC, PBS, and MSNBC.

In addition to his filmmaking career, Epstein is a professor at California College of the Arts, in Oakland, California, where he also serves as chair of the Film Program. He has also been a visiting professor at the Graduate Film Program at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. He currently serves on the board of the Yerba Buena Center of the Arts in San Francisco.

Epstein is a member of the Directors Guild of America, and of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, where he currently serves on the Board of Governors and is chair of the documentary branch.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.