

## FILM REVIEW

# New film will make viewers think about how they see AIDS victims

By Jim Riley

*Philadelphia*, directed by Jonathan Demme, deals with one of the most difficult problems plaguing our society today: our attitudes towards people suffering with AIDS.

Tom Hanks portrays Andrew Beckett, a prominent Philadelphia attorney on the "fast track" to a promising career, who contracts the HIV virus through his gay lifestyle. From the time he contracts the virus until he becomes HIV positive, Beckett conceals his disease from his co-workers at his law firm for fear of what might happen to him. Unfortunately, another lawyer in the firm learns Beckett has AIDS, and alerts his partners of his discovery. After Beckett is fired from the firm, he begins his search for a lawyer to help him legally challenge the prejudiced law firm.

After a gruelling search through nearly every lawyer in town, Beckett eventually finds an unscrupulous black attorney named Joe Miller (Denzil Washington).

Although Miller is notorious for representing almost everyone, he is extremely homophobic and his style of practicing law is entirely anti-ethical to Beckett's. After initially refusing the case because of Beckett's homosexuality, Miller manages to overcome his personal prejudices enough to decide to represent Beckett.

The film develops Miller's inner conflict regarding the homosexual lifestyle, dramatizing the conflict between Miller's defense of Beckett and his negative attitude toward the gay way of life. Miller is questioned several times about his own sexuality, and he reacts violently to even having the question posed.

Other memorable scenes include those during the trial, and the flashbacks that occur during the trial—about Beckett's life, his good years with the firm, and his past sexual encounters leading up to his contraction of the AIDS virus.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this film comes in the faithful support given to Beckett

from his family. Family members love him unconditionally, which is evident in the scene in which Beckett explains his situation about the trial. They do not care about potential negative repercussions; they care about Beckett and the rule of law.

*Philadelphia* has been criticized by various civic organizations for providing only a superficial view of the gay/lesbian lifestyle. This criticism is well justified. Although it does not go into detail about how gays and lesbians live and interact, *Philadelphia* raises the serious issue of how people with AIDS are treated in our society.

This film was very well cast, especially with Tom Hanks as Andrew Beckett. Hanks, who has been known more recently for his blockbuster comedy roles, gives a moving and convincing portrayal of a man infected with the AIDS virus.

Denzil Washington, who has appeared in *Malcolm X* and *The Pelican Brief*, gives a riveting

performance as the sleazy lawyer who is only in practice to make money. Washington begins by despising all homosexuals, and by the film's end, he accepts them as human beings, and has conquered his fear.

The supporting cast also is quite noteworthy. Antonio Banderas' performance of Miguel, Beckett's boyfriend, is especially strong. Also, Jason Robards turns in a fine performance as Charles Wheeler, Beckett's bigoted boss.

Overall, this movie touches on deep social issues, and is well worth the price of a ticket. Whether you know or have known someone with the AIDS virus, this movie will make you think about your behavior and attitudes toward people suffering from AIDS. On a scale of one to ten, I would give *Philadelphia* a 9.5. The film's primary weakness is its superficial treatment of the gay/lesbian lifestyle. But for the most part, *Philadelphia* is a well-written, directed, and acted film which most viewers should enjoy.

## BOOK REVIEW

# Faith in God helped slaves to survive

*A History of African-Americans in North Carolina* by Jeffrey Crow, by Paul Escott and Flora Hatley (207 pages). Published by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1992.

By Michelle Meketi

*The History of African-Americans in North Carolina* deals with the history of African-Americans from 1585 until the Civil Rights era of the 1960's.

The book begins with the story of how blacks came to America. Slaves were brought to Virginia and North Carolina first because that's where the first settlements were. Life was hard for the early slaves, who arrived on American soil naked and unable to speak their owners' language. The book narrates how slaves began raising their own food, how they made their own clothes, and how they adapted to the demands of life in the strange new world.

Early slaves were not allowed to assemble anywhere without a white person being present, including in churches, and they were only allowed to attend Christian churches. The book's authors argue that faith in God helped slaves to survive the cruelties and hardships they faced.

"North Carolina's slaves were basically religious people," the authors write, "and many firmly believed that one day God would deliver them from bondage." The authors usually try to present events from the slaves' point of view, concluding that "The Civil War represented the unfolding of God's plan, a divine purpose to end the great evil of human bondage."

Although many history books depict slaves as being passive, *The History of African-Americans in North Carolina* offers much evidence to refute this image.

During the Revolutionary War, for instance, many slaves rebelled against their masters, fighting for

the British in hopes they would gain their freedom. Slaves built forts, crafted weapons, made ammunition, cleared roads and shoed horses. They served as spies, guides and laborers. At the end of the war, however, few blacks were freed.

Some of those slaves who were freed were later captured and re-enslaved in the south.

During the 1800's, slave labor was an integral part of North Carolina's agrarian economy. The only other industries of notes were furniture making and "naval stores," which sold tar, turpentine and pitch. Slaves were also active in these enterprises as well. "Slave labor underpinned the naval store industry and rice culture of the lower Cape Fear region," the authors write.

North Carolina blacks emerged from the aftermath of the Civil War in a better position to begin improving their lot.

From 1877 to 1900, the authors

note that African-Americans "earned a living, reared their children, pursued education and strove to better themselves. They were free to follow a variety of paths," including becoming businessmen, farmers and educators. During this time, N.C. blacks were able to take advantage of educational opportunities available through the federally established Freedman's Bureau.

Although *The History of African-Americans in North Carolina* presents a solid overview of the African-American role in the state's history, it leaves out some important details, like the important role of historically black colleges, including ECSU. The only mention of ECSU deals with ECSU's students' participation in a 1971 march in defense of black schools. Still, this book should help bring a much-needed balance to the historical perspective on African-American's contribution to the state's history.