

AN EARLY FROST

by Steve Warren

NBC, hoping to sustain their number-one momentum, escalated the education of Middle America about homosexuality with the film *An Early Frost*, which aired November 11.

The last breakthrough came in February with ABC's *Consenting Adult*, one of last season's ten highest-rated made-for-TV movies. That success no doubt helped producer Perry Lafferty to sell this idea, which he'd been working on for almost two years.

An Early Frost repeats most of the plot devices and coming-out clichés of *Consenting Adult* but adds AIDS to the mix. Michael (Aidan Quinn) lets his conservative parents, Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara, have it with both barrels:

Michael: "I have AIDS."

Mother: "That's impossible. AIDS is that disease that's—"

Michael: "I'm gay."

The characters have been established by this time. The family is middle class, naturally. The nouveau riche Gazzara owns a lumber yard and his blue collar is frayed at the edges. Rowlands, daughter of Sylvia Sidney, was a promising pianist who still gives lessons to children but sacrificed a concert career for marriage. She's brassy enough to be interesting.

Michael and his lover Peter (D.W. Moffett) are model faggots, what the classifieds call "straight-appearing." Michael has just been made a partner in his law firm, Peter restores antiques and has a shop full of overpriced kitsch. They've been together for two years, monogamously except for a couple of slips on Peter's part.

The film is front-loaded with information, as if to get as many points across as possible before the target audience tunes out, mentally or physically. Michael is diagnosed by the first commercial break, after innocently listing most of the AIDS symptoms ("...a little tired. Sometimes I get these night sweats...") to the doctor he consults about a persistent cough.

Another doctor, who treats Michael in the hospital, goes on and on: "You can only get [AIDS] through intimate contact or blood...We don't know how long the incubation period is...It's not just a gay disease. It never was." Remember, he's telling these things to the millions who were too lazy to read them in *Newsweek*.

As Michael returns home to his lover the

doctor counsels, "Touching's okay. Hugging. I'd be careful about being more intimate than that." Missing is any reference to safe sex. In this picture sex between men is lethal and once you have AIDS you don't do it. Period. Peter confesses to his extramarital activity and apologizes. Michael blames him, even though he's been told he might have contracted the disease five years ago: "You're sorry and I have AIDS... I could have gotten this because of you!"

Before that the only problem in their perfect relationship was Michael's inability to come out to his parents. Peter raises the issue again: "When are you gonna tell them? When are they gonna have the great honor of knowing who you are? After you're dead?"

Michael drives Peter away and goes back to his parents. After he comes out the disease is almost forgotten as they try to adjust to his gayness. Mama comes around first, of course — the kid's not queer for nothing. Papa doesn't loosen up until ambulance drivers refuse to take Michael to the hospital: "I'm sorry. We're not handling anybody with AIDS." Gazzara carries his son downstairs and drives him, but still won't visit him in the hospital.

Rowlands pushes a doctor for news of Michael's chances and is told, "I've never known anyone with AIDS to survive." The last of the believers, she counters, "There must be something you can do. You're a doctor!"

At a support group in the hospital we meet Victor (John Glover), one of those flaming but noble faggots the audience can understand. The less sympathetic can also look at him and think, "That's the kind of person who should have AIDS." Aside from this scene there's no mention of the support systems we've built to help people with AIDS.

Hearing Victor's story Rowlands the fighter reports to Gazzara, "He's dying all alone...That is not going to happen to our son." Learning about Peter she invites him to visit. He and Michael talk out their differences and Michael says that in spite of his anger, "...That doesn't mean I didn't love you." This is the closest either of them comes to verbalizing his love for the other in the whole two hours. Otherwise they show it only in the most casual of touches — but it's obvious to us.

Gazzara confronts Peter in one of the most dramatic scenes: "Why couldn't it have been you?" Peter responds — and have a hanky



Gina Rowlands, Ben Gazzara and Aidan Quinn (also seen on our cover) star in NBC's film about AIDS, *An Early Frost*.

ready — "I wish it had been me, because I don't know how I'm going to live without him."

The worst effects of the disease are confined to the movie's middle portion. Though no false hopes are raised, Michael looks relatively healthy as he resolves his conflicts with his father and with his pregnant sister (Sydney Walsh), who has been afraid to go near him.

The ending is compromise. Michael leaves his parents' house to return to Peter, but we don't see the lovers together. Instead the final image is of Rowlands and Gazzara watching him leave, knowing they may never see him again.

It falls to the elegant looking Sylvia Sidney to deliver the obvious symbolism of the line the title comes from. Having just learned that her grandson has AIDS, she prunes her roses and says, "I only hope an early frost doesn't come along and nip them in the bud." Later she compares ignorant reactions to people

with AIDS with the way her husband was shunned as he was dying of cancer: "It's a disease, not a disgrace... They thought if he breathed on them, they'd develop a tumor. But that's how people are."

Rowlands, Gazzara and Sidney give impeccable performances. Aidan Quinn returns to the style he used in his film debut, *Reckless*, but toned down for *Desperately Seeking Susan*: When he's intense he's James Dean, when he's sensitive he's Montgomery Clift.

Director John Erman is one of the very best telefilm directors (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Who Will Love My Children?*, and *An Early Frost* won't hurt his streak).

Just remember that his picture wasn't made for gays who have been living and dying with AIDS for five years. It's for your parents and the people at work, the ones you haven't been able to discuss it with. And if it had aired a week earlier, it might have had a positive influence on some election returns.

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