

# **Philadelphia Analysis**

**Written By: John Mitchell Price**

The 1993 film *Philadelphia*, which was directed by Jonathan Demme, is considered to be a groundbreaking film that breaks both film and social barriers. The film was a drama that starred Tom Hanks, who won an Oscar for his role, and Denzel Washington. The film is about a lawyer named Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks), who is fired from an influential law-firm, which Andy believes that his illness with AIDS is the reason. Andrew seeks the aid of Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington), another reputable lawyer, to help him sue the law firm that wrongfully fired him for prejudice and discriminatory purposes. My analysis on this film will be the examination of both Production elements and the ideological analysis of the film. Both of these approaches help visualize and symbolize the impact this movie had cinematically and culturally. In regards for Ideological analysis I will look at the film using historical context and point of view approach to dissect and understand the film's true motivations and themes. I will be highlighting most aspects of the film's production elements of the film, such as: point of view, color, lighting, movement, angles, and sound.

In regards to the Ideological approach, I will examine the film using historical context. The film itself is an excellent example of discrimination of the LGBT community and those afflicted with AIDS. The main character Andy, played brilliantly by Tom Hanks, was gay. Unfortunately, for his character, the idea of being gay was not as acceptable as it is now, and even still, the LGBT community still face major discrimination. Being gay during the time of the movie was controversial enough, unfortunately to be affected with AIDS while in the working world would be almost unbearable at that time. To better understand the tribulations that this character has had to face, we must first understand the severity of the AIDS epidemic.

The first recorded incident of AIDS in the United States occurred June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1981 when The CDC published a report “describing cases of a rare lung infection, *Pneumocystis carinii*

*pneumonia* (PCP), five young, previously healthy, gay men in Los Angeles” ([www.aids.gov](http://www.aids.gov)). By the end of 1981, over 120 individuals had died from AIDS. Then in 1982, it was first noticed among women, and even infants who contracted it through blood transfusions. This created a countrywide sense of panic as people still were unsure of how to contract it. Following the panic in 1982, people from Haiti, to countries in Europe, and Africa were reported to have contracted the virus. By September of 1982 the CDC had officially named the virus AIDS. “In January 1983, AIDS was reported among the female partners of males who had the disease suggesting it could be passed on via heterosexual sex.”([www.advert.org](http://www.advert.org)).

Within the next following years, the virus was covered by almost every major media outlet. Times and Newsweek were covering the process and tracking information of the disease by interviewing doctors and patients with experience of the virus. By year 1988, “Nearly 107,000 cases of AIDS have been diagnosed in the United States and over 62,000 deaths had been recorded.” (Salyer).

In 1993, United States traveling agencies had issued a government approved banned to those afflicted with HIV. This was done for several reasons. The first one was to try and attempt to halt the spread of the virus. Another reason was that the economic and political landscape at the time was concerned with illegal immigration coming into the country. This ban was utilized under a kill two birds with one stone mentality. This ban was officially lifted in 2010, with the purpose of renewing hope that we know more about the disease because it can be managed, as well as preventing further stigmatizing of victims of AIDS.

For Andy, having AIDS during this time period was an already cruel twist of fate. Unfortunately for him, also being gay was to be considered a social pariah. The United States constitution, as well as the colonists who first came here to settle followed strict Puritan beliefs.

They were Christians who followed what the Bible say, and what it had written down was law.

This Christian/Puritan belief structure followed its way into our American moral guidelines during this period. Being gay was considered a sin and to be morally wrong by others. It was unnatural and considered serious taboo and those who were open about being gay were constantly scrutinized, oppressed, and mocked by fellow citizens, government officials, and several forms of media. Despite it being the 1980's people still had little understanding of the gay community and viewed social institutions through a Christian/conservative lens.

Unfortunately for Andrew, HIV/AIDS wasn't like other health issues, with the exception of Polio, thus hyping up the public's fear, mistrust, and ignorance of the virus. Because there wasn't a cure, people who were afflicted with it were discriminated against openly and quickly. The lack of understanding the disease and how it spread ushered forth a witch hunt of sorts against the LGBTQ community. People who were outed were openly criticized and mocked by the public, which made the image of the community and the virus even worse. It was called the Gay Plague in a mocking form of sorts. Because of this people were being fired if they were HIV positive. Health officials as well created public awareness of how the disease was spread. This push for public information about AIDS was to prevent discrimination and hatred with the afflicted, as well as bigotry towards the LGBTQ community. Unfortunately bigotry and prejudice spread quicker than the public awareness. The film *Honest Heart*, expertly showed the level of paranoia, bigotry, fear, and confusion that the LGBT community had to go through in order to create public awareness of AIDS. Thankfully Congress passed the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act that prohibited people from being fired or terminated from their jobs for simply having AIDS, or for that matter gay. This film was inspired by the actions of Geoffrey Bowers and Clarence Cain. Both of whom were fired from their employers for

being HIV positive. They both took their cases to court and won. These court cases brought not only the deep rooted homophobic views of this country, but their ignorance of the virus as well. Philadelphia, the city itself, was important to the story because “it was an early center of AIDS activism. The city established a special AIDS office early on, which reported directly to the mayor. Researchers from around the region would contribute to advances in understanding and treating the disease.” (Gordon).

The film was an excellent example of the power of the point of view approach. According to Art Silverblatt “Point of View refers to the source of information – who is telling the story. Point of view has an impact on how the story is told and what information is conveyed.” (Silverblatt, Ferry, and Finan 40). Through the film we see Joe Miller change in his view point of the gay community and the AIDS epidemic. We start at the beginning of the film with him being very close minded and xenophobic of the gay community. An example of this would be the dinner scene with his wife. In this scene he voices his opinion that homosexuals are not only unnatural, but they also make him uncomfortable. During his rant his wife, while looking at his statements with disfavor and annoyance, tells him not to use homophobic slurs in front of their daughter. Next would be all of Joe’s encounters with Andrew during the beginning of the film. He’s hesitant to even be near him, let alone touch him. His personal opinions and beliefs originally force him to decline Andrew’s assistance and care. However he starts to change his opinion at the library. To me, this scene is one of the most important scenes in the entire film. On first glance, it’s where Joe starts to see some of the injustice that Andrew is facing. When taken at another glance however, Andrew’s struggle with his sexuality being accepted is similar to how Joe and the rest of the African American community is being accepted, despite the large amount of racism and bigotry that they face. Joe even faces some

discrimination at the library with an individual who stares at him while walking by. This was to signify the parallel that both Joe and Andre have to experience on a daily basis. This creates of bridge of similarity and comradery it's incredibly layered with amount of themes inlaid within it. An example would be when Joe is di between the two that Joe recognizes and comes to the realization that helping him is the right thing to do, despite him not understanding nor approving of Andrew's lifestyle. This creates and interesting complexity to the story. We have one discriminated member of society helping another discriminated member, however the former loathes the latter's lifestyle. This sis till evident when Joe is at the bar with other attorneys. They expressed their disgust and mockery with Joe about helping Andrew. Joe tells them to essentially shut it because Andrew's case is a fight for justice because he was unlawfully fired, however Joe still admits that he hates Andrew's people and calling them fairies. The next example of Joe's continued prejudice is when he meets a gay law student I the pharmacy store, while originally touched with the young man's support over the case, he becomes disgusted with the students assumption that he was gay. Joe grabs him, and throws several gay slurs at him, all the while making a scene I the store. This proves that while Joe is making progress on the road to accepting the gay community, he still harbors the same homophobic tendencies that the public still has about the gay community. It shows that he is willing to represent Andy because he feels it's the right thing to do, but the film doesn't want you to forget that he is prejudiced against gay people.

The next evolution of Joe's tolerance in regards to the point of view, is his speech about sexuality in regards to Andrew's firing and the case. His inquiring whether Andrew's former college was gay struck a chord throughout the entire courtroom. Joe's speech about how everyone has thought about everyone's sexuality resonated with not only the characters involved,

but with us as the audience. It's a relatable idea that we constantly think about. It's highlighting that the case isn't about him or Andrew, but about society's disgust and aversion to the LGBTQ community and the AIDS epidemic. It's about how xenophobic can not only destroy lives and careers, but also end them with ignorance on important matters.

The courtroom scene's importance stretches into when Joe and his wife go to their first gay party at Andrew's flat. Joe is uncomfortable but begins to get comfortable with the party and its guests. This transitions to when Joe and Andrew are discussing the court after the party. They are all alone, to which we finally see Joe relaxed with Andrew. This is followed by Andrew's speech about how unfair life can be all the while explain his love for the *La Momma Morta* song. It's this particular scene that establishes Joe's acceptance to Andrew being a real individual that Joe can relate to and sympathize with. He sees Andrew as another man who is being discriminated by the man and society and recognizes that struggle within his on community. Joe recognizes Andrew as the impressive and beautiful soul that he is, and not for his sexuality. This opens up Joe to where he even puts on Joe's breathing mask on the end. This signifies Joe's acceptance of Andrew. It emphasizes that the road they walked together brought them closer, as well as opened Joe's eyes to an oppressed community and lifestyle. He helps Andy despite his prejudice, which I think makes him a more identifiable and realistic character. Not to say that his actions are the proper ones, but the character feels more real because of it. Real people have flaws, which is why he was a relatable and remarkable character.

One of the most important aspects would be that of sound. The importance of the music and background songs were vital into making this movie so moving and influential. It added gravitas and impact to almost every scene. The score of the film was composed by the great Howard Shore, whose works on film have included The Lord of the Rings trilogy (from which

he won an Oscar for), Seven, and Silence of the Lambs. The musical score that he chose for this film was a more somber, dramatic vibe, which went perfectly with the heavy tone of the film. He also used silence perfectly within the film to further illustrate the bigotry that Andrew faces.

Scenes like in the boardroom and in the library emphasize the excellent use of sound and silence. The score and sound editing in these scenes force us to experience the same awkwardness and deplorability that Andrew experiences. It's to make us emphasize with him and feel scorn and hatred for those whose bigotry are making Andrew's life chaotic and unfair. The background sounds and musical tunes were expertly added because not only did they fit into the scene perfectly, but they also reflected the scenes that they were added to.

In the beginning of the film we hear of Bruce Springsteen's song that emphasizes Philadelphia's moniker of the "City of Brotherly Love". The song and the intro helps show the diversity of the city, thus setting us up with a particular worldview for the rest of the film.

The final example of the excellent use of sound in the film would be at the end of the film. The ending scene shows us a glimpse into Andy's childhood, all the while having Neil Young singing "*Philadelphia*" in the background. This is a moving and powerful use of the song as we realize that Andy died, but received justice in the end. It's to illicit a feeling of melancholy and bitter-sweetness that tells us that while life can be unfair and difficult, it's also beautiful.

Another excellent example of the use of sound and music from the soundtrack would be the opera scene with Andrew and Joe. The use of the song *La Momma Morta* by Maria Callas was an incredible choice. The song, both beautiful and tragic, was an excellent metaphor for what Andrew is going through. The song was sung during the French Revolution in regards to the fear mongering and violence that went on during the Reign of Terror. Andrew's impassioned speech about life and the background of this song is important. It established a parallel between

him and the people the song is describing. Both are being ostracized and attacked by the public for doing nothing wrong but being themselves. Those who suffered through both had to experience untold paranoia, frustration, depression, fear, and despair over a government that didn't care nor help.

The film also expertly utilized camera angles and movement. Examples of this expert camera work would be in close ups, point of view shots, angles, and movement. Close ups were another important factor into why this film is so powerful. Demme expertly chose to do close up angles in certain scenes in order to display the emotions of the characters, as well as describe their true motives. Nathan Smith belies that the film's close ups "Show the sinister and hollow façade of the lawyers working on the opposing team. We see their slick suits and peroxide smiles conceal their more harmful and conniving intentions, as these seasoned lawyers try to paint Beckett as a sick, bitter, and self-destructive man whose sexual proclivities lead to his diagnosis and that greed is motivating his law suit, not justice." (Smith).

Point of view shots were also done very well. An example of this usage would be when Andrew was starting to pass out in the courtroom. I felt like experienced the situation from his point of view. This created a sense of dread, anxiousness, and fear among the audience.

We also had tracking shots that showed the movement of the characters from one spot to another. In the pharmacy scene we see the young student come in and come near Joe, and we see Joe leave the pharmacy as well. With panning up we also see examples of this with e lesions on Andrew's chest as well as showing feet to head shots during the courtroom scenes.

The film also extensively used color and lighting in scenes. The film had a gritty, grainy color scheme to match its dark and tragic theme. An excellent example of the use of color and

lighting would be the opera scene with Joe and Andrew. The film cut off all color with the exception of whites, reds, and black. All of which are dominant colors and hues. This would reinforce the importance of the song to both Andrew and Joe. It emphasized the importance of scene in regards to the overall motif of the film: which is that life is both beautiful and tragic.

This movie has helped usher a new understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of the LGBT community in America. It showed the audience that just because you are different doesn't make you bad, immoral, or wrong. To be xenophobic is to be left behind in the dust of change and progression. Everyone is unique, and that is what makes the wide diverse tapestry that is humanity so incredible and fascinating. The movie's ideological approach as well as its production elements helps stress the importance of equality and understanding. The film brought forth not only the devastation that HIV/AIDS can cause, but also the heavy levels of discrimination that homophobia can cause.

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