

## NOW PLAYING

### ★ ★ 1/2 Longtime Companion Hippodrome

It's impossible to watch  
*Longtime Companion* without

being aware of how unique it is. It's one of the few films to mention gays, much less depict their lives without angst or



Howard (Patrick Cassidy) calls his lover on the phone after reading about a strange new cancer in a scene from *Longtime Companion*.

irony. It's also one of the first films to deal with AIDS.

The storyline is straightforward and lean in depicting the AIDS epidemic. It begins quietly in 1981 with people reading the *New York Times* article that first mentioned the unusual disease. From there the script moves with steady calm through the decade, showing the year-by-year toll AIDS takes on a group of gay friends.

Some die over a long period of time. Others are robust and active one year and gone the next. The ones who remain become sadly familiar with hospital protocol and the importance of a high white blood cell count.

There are other changes as well. At first, most people react with confusion and fear, lacking even a name for the virus that is killing their friends and lovers. But slowly they begin to vent their anger in positive ways. Some volunteer their time to help people living with AIDS; others become politically

active.

Despite moving a little too neatly from apathy to burgeoning social consciousness, *Longtime Companion* manages to be honest and frequently moving. The script by Craig Lucas focuses on white gay men involved in the artistic and professional world of New York City, but their stories of pain and loss are universal.

This certainly isn't the whole story of AIDS, but it never pretends to be. And gay men in major metropolitan centers like New York City and San Francisco were certainly the first group to bear the brunt of AIDS in the United States.

Norman René directs *Longtime Companion* with the flat authority of a documentary. He also elicits exceptional performances that rise above the lapses of the script.

The fine cast is headed by Campbell Scott as Willy, the uncertain center of the movie.

Early on, he visits a friend in the hospital and gives the man a warm hug. Then Willy casually asks to use the bathroom. He pretends to use the toilet and then spends the next few minutes nervously scrubbing himself with soap and water. Given the lack of medical knowledge in the early '80s, his fear is something anyone can empathize with.

Other strong touches appear throughout. John (Dermot Mulroney) becomes an amusing expert on the various medically suspect treatments that the sick and dying latch onto. And Bruce Davison is a marvel as David, a bedrock of sympathy and support while caring for his dying lover.

In his role as a care-giver, Davison delivers what is clearly one of the most powerful moments of the year. His striking performance makes this a movie worth watching.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ