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**ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEE *HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE*  
PREMIERES ON *INDEPENDENT LENS*  
MONDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2013 ON PBS**

“Even if you lived through this era, went to protests, wept over the AIDS quilt and believed yourself aware, director David France’s assured, seamless directorial debut, rich with archival footage, will teach you something about courage, dedication and the power of well-directed anger.” - Mary Pols, *Time Magazine*

(San Francisco, CA) — *How to Survive a Plague* tells the story of two coalitions, ACT UP and TAG (Treatment Action Group), whose fearless activism and innovation turned AIDS from a death sentence into a manageable condition. Despite having no scientific training, these self-made activists infiltrated the pharmaceutical industry and helped identify promising new drugs, moving them from experimental trials to patients in record time. With unfettered access to a treasure trove of never-before-seen archival footage from the 1980s and ‘90s, filmmaker David France puts the viewer smack in the middle of the controversial actions, heated meetings, heartbreaking failures, and exultant breakthroughs of heroes in the making. The film premieres on *Independent Lens*, hosted by Stanley Tucci, on Monday, December 30, 2013, 10:00-11:30 PM ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

In the dark days of 1987, the country was six years into the AIDS epidemic, a crisis that was still being largely ignored by government officials and health organizations — until the sudden emergence of the activist group ACT UP in Greenwich Village. Largely made up of HIV-positive participants who refused to die without a fight, they took on the challenges public officials had ignored, raising awareness of the disease through a series of dramatic protests. More remarkably, they became recognized experts in virology, biology, and pharmaceutical chemistry. Their efforts would see them seize the reins of federal policy from the FDA and NIH, force the AIDS conversation into the 1992 presidential election, and lead the way to the discovery of effective AIDS drugs that saved countless lives.

First-time director and award-winning journalist David France, who has been covering the AIDS crisis for 30 years, culls from a huge amount of archival footage — most of it

shot by the protestors themselves. Interspersed with contemporary interviews, the film is not just a historical document, but also an intimate and visceral recreation of the period through the personal stories of some of ACT UP and TAG's leading participants. Nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary, *How to Survive a Plague* captures both the joy and terror of those days, and the epic day-by-day battles that finally made AIDS survival possible.

Visit the *How to Survive a Plague* companion website (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/>) which features information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, and links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

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### **Statement from Director David France**

As a longtime journalist, I first began covering AIDS in the very early months of the epidemic, before it was even given a name. I began my career, in fact, as a response to the epidemic. All gay men had roles to play in the crisis, whether we liked it or not. Demanding answers and uncovering truths was what I settled on as my unique function.

Working first for the gay presses, I wrote some of the earliest stories about the mysterious new disease. When AIDS activism took foot, I wrote the first story about ACT UP for *The Village Voice*, and covered most of the events that I've included in my film. Deep in the backgrounds of these scenes, there I am pressed against the walls, filling my notepads. Soon I was writing about them for *The New York Times*, then *Newsweek*. I was invested in their efforts personally as well. Downtown New York City, where I lived, was a grotesque and up-close battlefield. My upstairs neighbor fell ill, and the guys on the fourth floor, and the one across the hall. My lover took ill. The cancer darkened his skin but it was the pneumonia that claimed him in 1992 — four years before new medications changed the course of the plague. For a long time I have wanted to tell the story of how those dark days ended — the combined brilliance that worked together to tame a virus.

### **About the Participants**

**Bill Bahlman** was among the first in the community to invent the idea of “treatment activism.” He co-founded The Lavender Hill Mob — an ACT UP precursor — in 1986.

**David Barr** was a practicing lawyer with a gay rights docket. He founded the support group whose casual meetings are depicted in the film.

**Gregg Bordowitz**, a filmmaker, writer, critic, video artist, and HIV-positive himself, combined his callings and created a number of moving pieces about AIDS; he then co-created the video department at GMHC, which left behind a large library of images.

**Spencer Cox, hoping** to strike it big as an actor in New York, was soon sitting on panels with Nobel Prize Winners. He passed away in December 2012.

**Garance Franke-Ruta**, a high-school dropout with a GED and a self described “science nerd,” was the youngest member of ACT UP’s Treatment and Data Committee.

**Gregg Gonsalves** came to ACT UP a few years later than the others, but his science background immediately allowed him to contribute.

**Mark Harrington** moved to New York to join the artistic movements in the East Village. He went to his first ACT UP meeting after learning that an ex-lover was sick.

**Larry Kramer**, the grandfather of AIDS activism, is a playwright and novelist who wrote early exhortations about the disease in the *New York Native* and elsewhere.

**Derek Link** focused his activism on identifying and obtaining drugs to prevent and treat the many opportunistic infections that accompanied HIV/AIDS.

**Iris Long, PhD** worked for 20 years in drug development and felt compelled to play a role in HIV; it was at ACT UP that she found her calling, as mentor and leader, in winning reforms at the FDA and the NIH, as well as concessions from drug companies.

**Peter Staley** was a rising star as a bond trader, and deeply closeted, before HIV struck him low and gave him no options besides fending for himself.

### **About the Filmmaker**

Director/Producer **David France** is an award-winning journalist and *New York Times* best-selling author who has been writing about AIDS since 1982, beginning in gay-community papers. Today he is one of the best-known chroniclers of the epidemic, having continued in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *New York* magazine, where he is now a contributing editor. For his journalism, Mr. France has received the National Headliner Award and the GLAAD Media Award, and has seen his work inspire several films, most recently the Emmy-nominated Showtime film *Our Fathers*, based on his critically acclaimed book. As a filmmaker, he has been acknowledged with an Oscar nomination, a second GLAAD Award, and Best First Film honors from the Gotham Awards, the International Documentary Association, the New York Film Critics Circle, the Boston Society of Film Critics, and the Provincetown Film Festival, among others. He is at work on a major history of AIDS, due from Alfred A. Knopf in 2015.

### **CREDITS**

Director	David France
Writers	David France T. Woody Richman Tyler H. Walk
Producers	Howard Gertler David France

Executive Producers     Joy Tomchin  
   Dan Cogan  
Co-Executive Producer     Alan Getz

**About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The senior series producer is Lois Vossen. More information at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). Join *Independent Lens* on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/independentlens](http://www.facebook.com/independentlens).