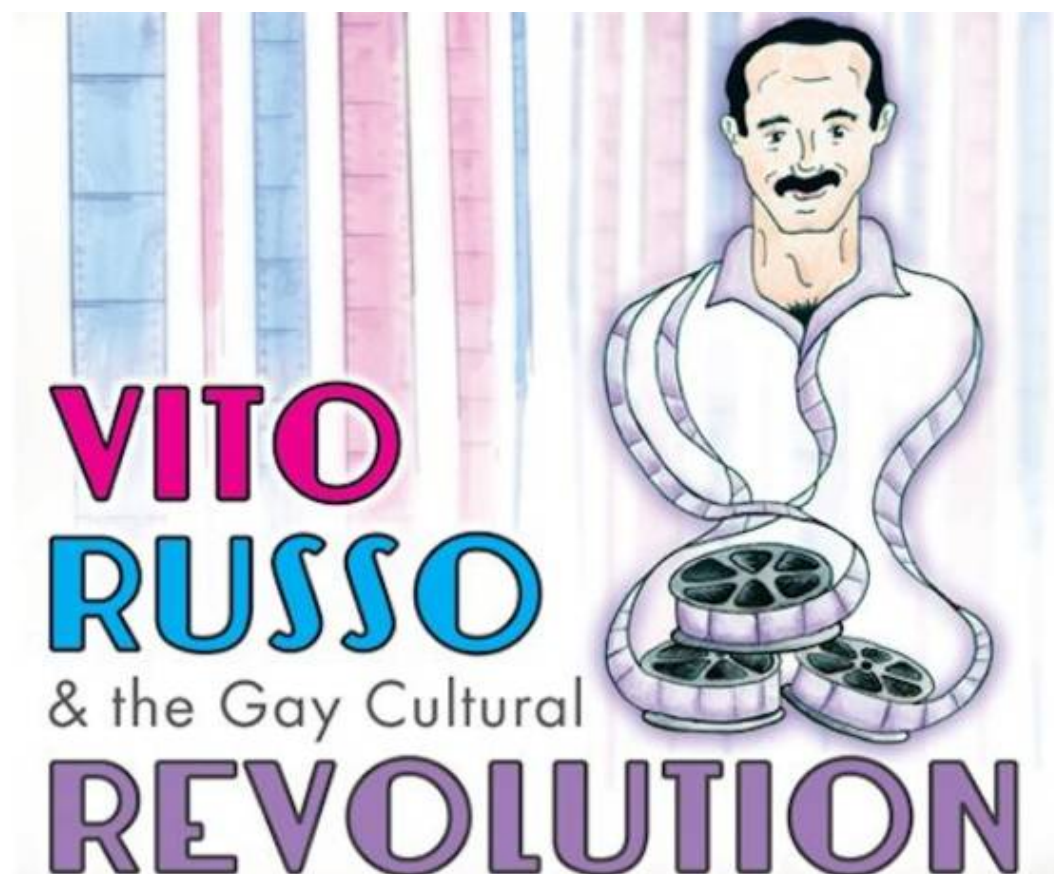


## Vito, The Life and Activism of Vito Russo

Natasha Lardera (March 27, 2013)



The history of gay rights from the Stonewall riots to the AIDS epidemic is told through the story of Italian American activist Vito Russo in the HBO documentary *Vito*, by filmmaker Jeffrey Schwarz. As the Supreme Court takes up an historic gay marriage battle it is hard to forget how essential Vito Russo's work was and continues to be.

As the Supreme Court readies for gay marriage cases (the first case concerns Proposition 8, a California constitutional amendment which banned gay marriage in the state after it had been legal for a brief time, while the second is a challenge to the federal [Defense of Marriage Act](#) [2], which denies federal benefits to spouses in gay marriages) and the new play ["Hit The Wall."](#) [3] [Ike Holter](#) [4]'s drama about the days of the [Stonewall riots](#) [5], has taken up residence at the [Barrow Street Theater](#) [6], there is a lot of buzz about how things have changed in the LGBT community.

"On June 27, 1969, a police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar called the Stonewall took a surprising turn when patrons decided it was time to fight back. As a riot erupted on Christopher



Street, a new era in the [Gay Rights Movement](#) [7] was born. [Vito Russo](#) [8], a 23-year-old film student, was among the crowd.” This is the beginning of the synopsis of Vito, an HBO Documentary on the life of gay activist Vito Russo by director [Jeffrey Schwarz](#) [9] that is being released today in Europe after the success it has had in America.

The synopsis continues: “Over the next twenty years until his death from AIDS in 1990, Vito would go on to become one of the most outspoken and inspiring activists in the LGBT community’s fight for equal rights. He was a pivotal part of three well-known organizations during their formative years: [GAA](#) [10] (Gay Activists Alliance), which staged subversive works of protest performance art to secure rights and dignity for all gay people; [GLAAD](#) [11] (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), formed to ensure that media representation of gays and lesbians was accurate; and [ACT UP](#) [12] (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), a guerrilla activist group that turned the fury over President Reagan’s refusal to do anything about AIDS into a series of highly telegenic acts of civil disobedience. In the midst of his commitment to activism, Vito was also a prolific writer. His seminal book [“The Celluloid Closet”](#) [13] explored the ways in which gays and lesbians were portrayed on film, what lessons those characters taught gay and straight audiences, and how those negative images were at the root of society’s homophobia. Even before the book was published, Vito was taking “The Celluloid Closet” on the road, traveling to gay film festivals and college campuses for an entertaining and informative lecture-slash-clip show that intertwined Vito’s love of show business and radical gay politics. He continued writing, lecturing, speaking out and acting up until just months before his death.”

Vito Russo was born in 1946 and grew up in a traditional Catholic Italian family in East Harlem and New Jersey in the ‘50s and ‘60s, yet he never allowed the oppressive influence of tradition, religion, and family convince him that he was born as something unnatural. In a clip early in the film he makes clear what separated him from generations of gay people before him. “I don’t know what was different about the way I was raised or the way I reacted,” he says, “but I never once, not for a second, believed that it was wrong to be gay, that it was a sin, that homosexuality was evil.”

“The idea of a film came about when I realized that Vito participated in every significant milestone in the gay liberation movement -- from Stonewall to ACT UP -- and that his story was also the story of our community,” filmmaker Jeffrey Schwarz states, “A documentary could contextualize how he and his gay liberation brothers and sisters were able to begin to overcome homophobia and oppression, and emerge from invisibility to liberation. We are all living the end result Vito’s work, and our freedom is his gift to us.”

The director got his start in the film business working as an apprentice editor on the 1995 [Peabody Award](#) [14]-winning HBO documentary adaptation of Vito Russo’s [The Celluloid Closet](#), directed by [Rob Epstein](#) [15] and [Jeffrey Friedman](#) [16]. “That was where I really got to know Vito, just a few years after he passed away. Rob and Jeffrey had all of Vito’s research materials, articles, videotapes, lectures and most importantly, extended interviews with Vito himself.”

Mr. Schwarz’s film is made of a mix of historical images and interviews with acquaintances and experts. The telling of his story smoothly “juxtaposed against the present day, when gay marriage is sanctioned in some states and gay characters are all over prime-time television.” (Neil Genzlinger, NYT).

“The things that you think are going to take 10 years take 100 years,” Vito himself has said to the camera, during an interview that took place more than two decades ago but feels as if it happened 1000 years ago. Vito dedicated his life to fighting prejudice and campaigning for equality yet he never got to see the evolution of gay rights and this compelling documentary shows how essential his work was and continues to be.

If you are interested in booking a screening of VITO, click [here>>>](#) [17]



## Links

- [1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/vitorussocoveris1364405796jpg>
- [2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense\\_of\\_Marriage\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_of_Marriage_Act)
- [3] <http://www.barrowstreettheatre.com/whats-on/hitthewall.asp>
- [4] <http://www.steppenwolf.org/Plays-Events/productions/bio.aspx?id=549&crewId=2219>
- [5] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonewall\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonewall_riots)
- [6] <http://www.barrowstreettheatre.com/index.asp>
- [7] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT\\_social\\_movements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_social_movements)
- [8] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vito\\_Russo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vito_Russo)
- [9] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey\\_Schwarz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Schwarz)
- [10] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay\\_Activists\\_Alliance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_Activists_Alliance)
- [11] <http://www.glaad.org>
- [12] <http://www.actupny.org>
- [13] <http://www.amazon.com/Celluloid-Closet-Homosexuality-Movies/dp/0060961325>
- [14] <http://peabodyawards.com>
- [15] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob\\_Epstein](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Epstein)
- [16] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey\\_Friedman\\_\(filmmaker\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Friedman_(filmmaker))
- [17] <http://vitorussomovie.com/>