

# Tom, Thanks for Philadelphia

February 12, 2020

PHILADELPHIA (1993)

Directed by Jonathan Demme

Written by Ron Nyswaner

Starring Denzel Washington & Tom Hanks as Andy Beckett

Here's what I know: whatever it is to be good in this life, has nothing to do with the laws written in anyone's constitution, the commandments written in anyone's bible, or the standard designed in anyone's code of conduct. Good does not evolve or redefine, it is neither tangible nor quantifiable. Good is consistent to a point which no mortal could perfectly meet, though we must always try, for it's written only in our very nature, and what is good but a myth if not for our seeking of its realization? Good is in you as sure as life itself. This is not to say the righteous thing is always binary, but we lead with our instincts, and more or less, we tend to know good when we see it. Yes, we will always misstep. We're not guilty, nor innocent, we're just trying to survive.

I read this week about a study which found babies as young as eighteen months are generally willing to share food even in a state of hunger. This not only suggests that humans have a certain innate altruism from infancy, it also demonstrates the clear ethical inconclusiveness of experiments involving the starving of babies. Point is, we tend to do what we deem is right, whether for an individual (in the case of the recipient of the baby's shared food) or a greater good (in the case of the public having learned from the sacrifice of the test subject). 1993's Philadelphia is a movie about men who are guided by virtue, in spite of the flaws of their humanity. TH plays Andy Beckett, a once prodigious law partner who's fired for under-performance and seeks representation from TV lawyer Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) in his wrongful termination suit. In fact, Andy believes his dismissal is related to his sexuality and his AIDS diagnosis. Indeed, it would appear the most powerful legal figureheads of Philly have a streak of prejudice, as Joe initially refuses the case, later frankly stating that the gay lifestyle makes him sick. He eventually takes Andy on as a client because, to a TV lawyer, apparently the rule of law eclipses one's predispositions.

This marks the start of Joe's move to tolerance, which isn't plainly completed in the course of this film. Indeed, he makes strides toward accepting the equality of all, and in doing so, befriends Andy, but at no point does he renounce his prior bigotry. For that reason, I don't think Philadelphia would be the same movie if made in 2020. Today, our every mainstream artistic export seems fixated on the binary ruling of right and wrong, and every decidedly immoral character must, in plot, be either reformed or vanquished. I think this movie works better as a study of how two different people, with a unified commitment to upholding the law, join to defend against a perceived injustice. After all, the movie's called Philadelphia for two reasons: it's the birthplace of a nation's laws, and it's the city of brotherly love.

I'd be remiss not to mention an all-star ensemble of secondary players such as Antonio Banderas, Bradley Whitford, and Jason Robards, all of whom help establish the film's tone of heartfelt unease. But let's discuss the first of two consecutive Oscar-winning performances by Tom Hanks. Save for a barely noticeable blemish in the corner of his forehead, Andy Beckett first appears unmarked and youthful, with the bouncy exuberance synonymous with TH himself. But as his wellness fades, so does the character's energy, eventually devolving to a troubling whisper. For all his range, it's rare that Hanks plays soft-spoken people, but it's strikingly effective in both this performance and in his most recent Oscar-nominated turn as Mr. Rogers. But Andy isn't shy, he's weakened, and his demeanour is in stark contrast with the boorish manner of his colleagues. This is never more clear than in the scene following a Halloween party, when he shares with Joe his love of opera. Here, TH persuasively conveys the fear and shame of realizing one's impermanence, in a largely movement-based tableau. Nailing the scene is crucial because this is where Joe finds the empathy he needs to win his case. It's pulled off beautifully.

This is not a movie about death, but it's not a great surprise when, in the end, the inevitable happens. There's a long tradition of setting movie funerals in autumn; this is because, quite literally, autumn is death. It's additionally poignant that Philadelphia's funeral scene is set against the quiet of browning leaves and frail branches because autumn also represents a long-awaited relief. It's a death through which we may finally breathe. In TH's Oscar acceptance speech, he described this relief as "a healing embrace that cools their fevers, that clears their skin, and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident, common-sense truth that is made manifest by the benevolent

creator of us all, and was written down on paper by wise men, tolerant men, in the city of Philadelphia two-hundred years ago." I could ramble on for another thousand words about what I think it means to be good, but I could never say it better. "The streets of Heaven are too crowded with angels." It. Can't. Be. Said. Better.

So, let me just say this: There is only love and understanding. Everything else, for thousands upon thousands of years, is a learned complication. Even through the most vicious discrimination, Andy is supported by a family that sees him and his cause for their potential to bring people's thinking back to its natural good. Because we are born perfect, we are born angels. Whatever pandemics we intersect, be they in our veins or in our civility, they are learned complications, they're not who we're born to be. Prioritizing some almighty law is not what we're born to do. In survival, there is no guilt nor innocence, there is only love and understanding. True justice is served in the effort to believe we are good within.

Thx!