

# **BOOKS OF JAMES**

## **Synopsis**

Inspired by a collection of personal notebooks, **Books of James** is an experimental documentary on ART, AIDS and ACTIVISM. Based on the writing, drawing, video footage and personal revelation of James Wentzy, an artist/activist in New York City, the film illustrates the 30-year timeline from the late 1970s to the present, examining the changes in the social and political landscape of America.

Following James from South Dakota to New York City, the film traces his days from struggling and surviving as an artist to later becoming an AIDS video activist. In showcasing a unique individual through his involvement with the fight against AIDS and his tireless frontline reportage of the crisis, **Books of James** is an intimate portrait of a neglected everyman/hero and unearths a time now forgotten.

### **FULL SYNOPSIS**

With narration provided by James himself, the film is divided into 3 periods of his life, recorded in his journals and video footage over a 30-year time span:

#### **Part 1: The Personal** – Notebook entries from 1977 to 1990

From a middle class family in South Dakota, James moved to New York City after graduating at the Southern Illinois University. He began writing, drawing and photographing his daily big city life. Through the 70s and 80s, James was an aspiring artist/filmmaker.

#### **Part 2: The Political** – The ACT UP years

In 1990 James was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and began his participation in the ACTUP (New York) organization, creating and producing approximately 160 weekly community television programs for the public access channel, Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN). This segment is composed of James's footage of the international AIDS conferences, individual testimonies against discrimination and injustice, and public actions towards education, policy making, and community building.

#### **Part 3: Postscripts**

Having not written in his journals for many years since his diagnosis, the camera has become James's diaristic tool. This segment begins with the footage of James reluctantly going on AIDS medications, and also includes his Post-911 reflections and metaphysical musing. As the timeline progresses, the film moves towards to present day with James's thoughts on the state of AIDS activism and its relevance.

## **BOOKS OF JAMES**

### **Director's Statement**

**Books of James** is a film about the personal and the political. Being both intimately revealing and universally relevant, the film illustrates the coming of age story of an artist, and at the same time documenting the history of the AIDS crisis and activism in America and beyond.

In its previous 16-minute form, **Books of James** was a critically acclaimed work that garnered the 2004 *Grand Marnier Video Fellowship* awarded by the Film Society of the Lincoln Center.

Eight years in the making, **Books of James** tells a personal story from the point of view of an everyman. So often the personal is political, the story and footage of James serves to illustrate the capacity in all of us to make a difference in our surroundings. With the diminishing enthusiasm in the political and social actions today, AIDS activism has retreated into the background even though AIDS remains a devastating illness all over the world. It is my hope that **Books of James** will generate continual discourses and interventions, while providing the audience to glimpses of a life fully lived.

In approaching such an urgent story, I am relying on the openness and richness in the materials, much alike the mild-mannered but fascinating character that I have come to know, to speak in their own terms. I have chosen a non-directive approach to narrate the art and art of James, in hope that the audience will take on roles as participants to experience this important but forgotten history in our recent past.

Ho Tam

## **BOOKS OF JAMES**

### **Cast & Credits**

Director: Ho Tam

Voice: James Wentzy

Music: Wang Yemeng

Audio Recording: Ho Tam & Sikay Tang

Editing & Mixing: Ho Tam

Camera: James Wentzy & Ho Tam

Color Correction: Dennis Day

All archival materials are provided by James Wentzy & DIVA TV (ACT UP New York)

Shot on VHS, Hi8 and Mini DV

Canada / USA

2006

#### **In the order of appearance:**

##### **Part One**

W.P. Wentzy, James Wentzy, David Gasperik, Darrel Ellis, James Dee, Lee (the model),  
The Wentzy Family, Jonathon Chin, Michael Mitchell, Fat Cat

##### **Part Two**

Some of the participants in the interview segment includes:

Larry Kramer, Aldyn McKean, Anna Blume, Katrina Haslip, Andrea Schlesinger, John  
McIlveen, Ron Goldberg, Avram Finkelstein

The artist would like to acknowledge all the unnamed activists and individuals who stood  
up for the cause over the last 25 years

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