

## Kaposi's Sarcoma in Film

Alex C. Holliday<sup>1</sup>, Richard F. Wagner, Jr.<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77555-0783 (USA).

<sup>2</sup>Edgar B. Smith Professor of Dermatology.

Correspondence: Richard F. Wagner. The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77555 (USA).

e-mail: [rfwagner@utmb.edu](mailto:rfwagner@utmb.edu)

Received 13 March 2013; accepted 9 April 2013.

---

### Summary

Kaposi's sarcoma, a historically rare, indolent cutaneous malignancy of elderly men emerged as a frequent and easily recognizable cutaneous manifestation of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome in the 1980s. Since these tumors were often visible to the public, Kaposi's sarcoma quickly became a stigmatizing marker for those infected, and predicted the high mortality risk from comorbid opportunistic infections. English language films released from 1985-2008 are analyzed for their depictions of Kaposi's sarcoma, and the role(s) it played in these films. With the advent of highly active antiretroviral therapy for those with HIV infection, Kaposi's sarcoma has once again become relatively rare.

**Keywords:** Kaposi's sarcoma, HIV, AIDS, Skin, Cinema, Stigmatization.

---

### Resumen

El sarcoma de Kaposi, una enfermedad maligna cutánea, históricamente infrecuente, de curso indolente que afectaba a hombres de edad avanzada, emergió en los años 80 como una manifestación cutánea frecuente y fácilmente reconocible del Síndrome de Inmunodeficiencia Adquirida. Dado que estos tumores son con frecuencia visibles, el sarcoma de Kaposi rápidamente se convirtió en un marcador de estigmatización de las personas infectadas y predijo el alto riesgo de mortalidad por las infecciones oportunistas que acompañan al SIDA. Se han analizado las películas en inglés estrenadas entre 1985-2008 que mostraban imágenes de sarcoma de Kaposi y el papel que este ha jugado en ellas. Con la introducción de la terapia antirretroviral de gran actividad el sarcoma de Kaposi se ha convertido de nuevo en una patología relativamente rara.

**Palabras clave:** sarcoma de Kaposi, VIH, SIDA, piel, cine, estigmatización.

The author's state that this article is original and has not been previously published.

## Introduction

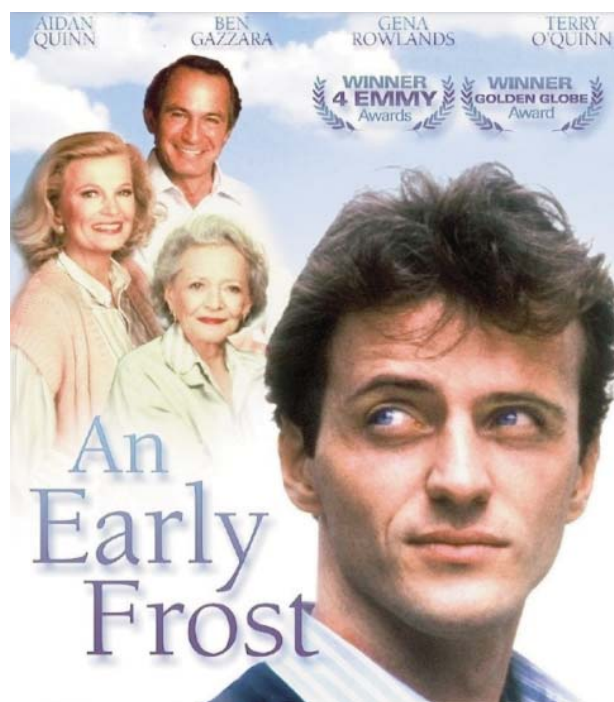
For centuries artists have referenced skin disease to facilitate characterization and communication with audiences, from Shakespeare's use of recognizable skin diseases in multiple plots to Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut of a man with syphilis. Today, filmmakers continue to incorporate dermatologic conditions to impact viewers. This analysis focuses on English language television and general release films that utilized depictions of Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) during the initial phase of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic.

Before highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) became widely available to treat patients infected with HIV, KS was ubiquitous in patients with AIDS. It became a stigmatizing, often superficial manifestation of the disease that was a powerful and visual reminder of the dawn of this emerging infection. Currently, HAART prevents and induces regression of KS<sup>1</sup>. However, antiretroviral therapy was in its infancy in the 1980s and early 1990s, the timeframe of these related films, rendering KS as a visual clue for AIDS and a harbinger of death, usually from comorbid opportunistic infections.

KS is characteristically a cutaneous disease presenting as solitary or disseminated erythematous to violaceous macules. These may evolve into papules, plaques, nodules, or exophytic tumors. KS may also involve other organs such as the lungs, gastrointestinal tract, and lymph nodes<sup>1</sup>. In 1981, a medical report linked KS to homosexual men<sup>2</sup>. Later, it was established that homosexual men with AIDS were 20 times more likely to be affected by KS than their hemophiliac counterparts, suggesting sexual transmission<sup>3</sup>. Finally, in 1994, human herpes virus-8 (HHV-8) was implicated in the etiology<sup>4</sup>. Importantly, HHV-8 is paramount to the etiology of KS and homosexual men are much more prone to contract both HIV and HHV-8 than women or hemophiliacs<sup>1</sup>.

## Films Depicting Kaposi's Sarcoma (Table 1)

*An Early Frost* (1985), a made-for-TV movie, was the first film that addressed the topic of KS and HIV/AIDS. The film focused on homosexual attorney Bob Maracek's turmoil in coming out of the closet to his family. He was forced to do so when faced with the diagnosis of AIDS. The dialogue reflected the fear and uncertainty of the American public to this new disease. While hospitalized with cerebral toxoplasmosis, Bob participated in a support group in which two members had KS. One was flamboyant Victor, an AIDS victim at



peace with his fate. He befriended Bob but died alone in a hospital ward.

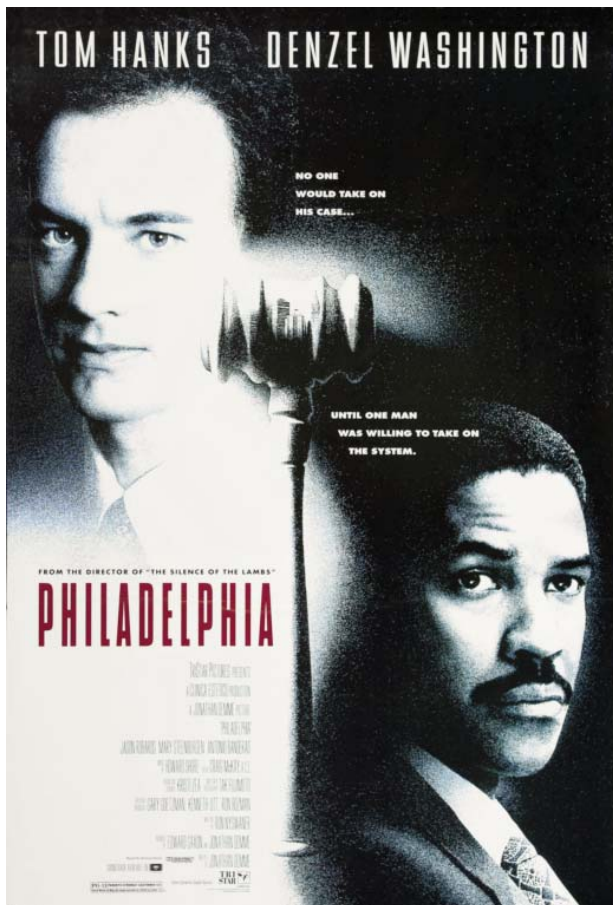
The drama *Longtime Companion* (1989) epitomized the time HIV/AIDS and KS (also known as the "gay cancer") first emerged during the early 1980s in New York and San Francisco. Young, otherwise healthy men suddenly became seriously ill with unusual opportunistic infections. This created a climate of trepidation across the United States and an avid hope for a cure among the infected. One scene depicted a beach jogger's face covered in KS. However, this picture of relative fitness was quickly contrasted to another character, soap opera writer Sean, whose KS presaged a slow decline in health as he contracted crippling opportunistic infections. Sean was reduced to an invalid prior to death's mercy.

The film, *And the Band Played On* (1993) portrayed investigative journalist Randy Shilts' book of the same title. Shilts focused on the scientific investigation relating to the AIDS epidemic conducted by researchers at the Centers for Disease Control. He postulated these efforts were thwarted by delayed action of an apathetic government, neglect of mainstream media, and conflict stemming from pride of French and American researchers. Taken together, the author suggested these factors delayed appropriate action and ultimately resulted in disease spread during the early years. Multiple characters are afflicted with KS in this film, highlighting its disfigurement

**Table 1.** Chronological Listing of Films Depicting Kaposi's Sarcoma

Year	Film	Character	Location of Kaposi's Sarcoma
1985	<i>An Early Frost</i>	Todd Victor DiMato	Face, neck Face, neck, torso, arms, hands
1989	<i>Longtime Companion</i>	Sean Beach runner	Face Face and left arm
1993	<i>And the Band Played On</i>	Claude-Bernard Hospital patient Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center patient (Brandy Alexander) Gaetan Dugas Bobbi Campbell VA. Hospital patient Man infected by Gaetan Dugas Bill Kraus	Face and neck Face, ear, neck, hands, forearms Neck Soles of feet (seen on TV) Face and neck Neck Face, ear, neck, right leg
1993	<i>Philadelphia</i>	Andrew Beckett	Face and torso
1996	<i>It's My Party</i>	Joe Lovett	Face, neck, torso, and hands
1998	<i>Gia</i>	Gia Carangi	Face
2000	<i>Before Night Falls</i>	Reinaldo Arenas	Face
2003	<i>Angels in America</i>	Roy Cohn Prior Walter	Face Torso
2005	<i>Rent</i>	Angel Schunard	Face and torso
2008	<i>The Informers</i>	Christie	Hips and thighs





and prevalence in the early days of HIV/AIDS.

The most famous film about KS was probably *Philadelphia* (1993). In this movie, Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks, the 1993 Academy Award winner for Best Actor) was a competent and upcoming associate attorney at a prestigious Philadelphia law firm. Once a KS lesion appeared on his forehead, AIDS was presumed. He struggled to conceal KS initially with a lie and later elaborate makeup. Nonetheless, he was terminated from his esteemed law firm under the pretext of jeopardizing an important lawsuit by failing to meet a deadline. However, the misplaced document was miraculously discovered and submitted at the last moment. His firm orchestrated the debacle to rid itself of an employee with KS and AIDS. Beckett, rejected by legal colleagues, struggled to hire a personal attorney for legal representation against his former employer. Finally, Joe Miller, a homophobic lawyer, was inspired to represent him. At first, Miller was terrified about contracting AIDS from Beckett—he went to his physician to determine if he could contract the virus by a business handshake. Ultimately, Miller obtained justice for Beckett. Suspense climaxed with Beckett on the

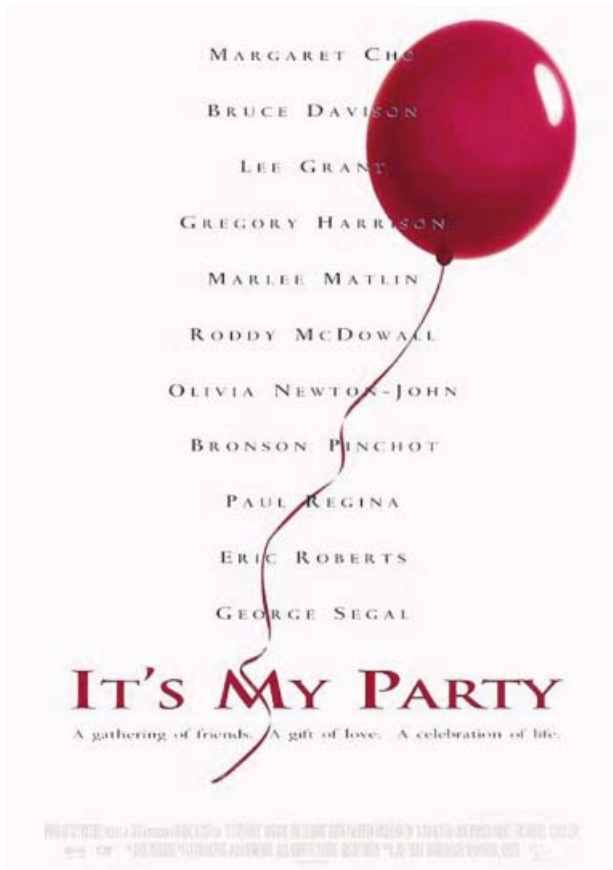
witness stand, revealing his KS ridden torso to a shocked courtroom. The jury looked beyond Beckett's skin disease and penalized the firm for wrongful termination, awarding Beckett millions of dollars in punitive damages. However, Beckett's personal victory was brief because he died from an opportunistic infection soon after.

*It's My Party* (1996) portrayed how protagonist Nick Stark's unexpected HIV diagnosis resulted in eventual estrangement from his life partner Brandon Theis. Years later when faced with Progressive Multifocal Leukoencephalopathy (PML), Nick decided to prematurely end his life and escape the predictable disease outcomes of blindness, incontinence, and dementia. Nick's choice emulated his friend Joe Lovett; Joey was covered in KS when he attempted suicide. To surround himself with those he loved on one last occasion, and to provide an opportunity to repair strained relationships, including the one with Brandon, Nick hosted a final celebration of life with friends and family before he imbibed a suicidal cocktail of secobarbital sodium and alcohol.

Poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas' memoir, *Before Night Falls* (2000) focused on the writer's escape from his impoverished upbringing only to be punished for living an overtly homosexual lifestyle and incarcerated for evading Cuban censorship. Once freed, he immigrated to the United States with thousands of other Cubans during the 1980 Mariel boatlift and took up residency in New York City. There, he was thrust into another type of captivity, the imprisonment of AIDS. Riddled with KS, he committed suicide aided by his friend and lover, Lazaro.

Playwright Tony Kushner adapted his 1993 Pulitzer winning theatrical drama *Angels in America* into an HBO miniseries broadcasted in 2003. Amidst the rising tide of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the

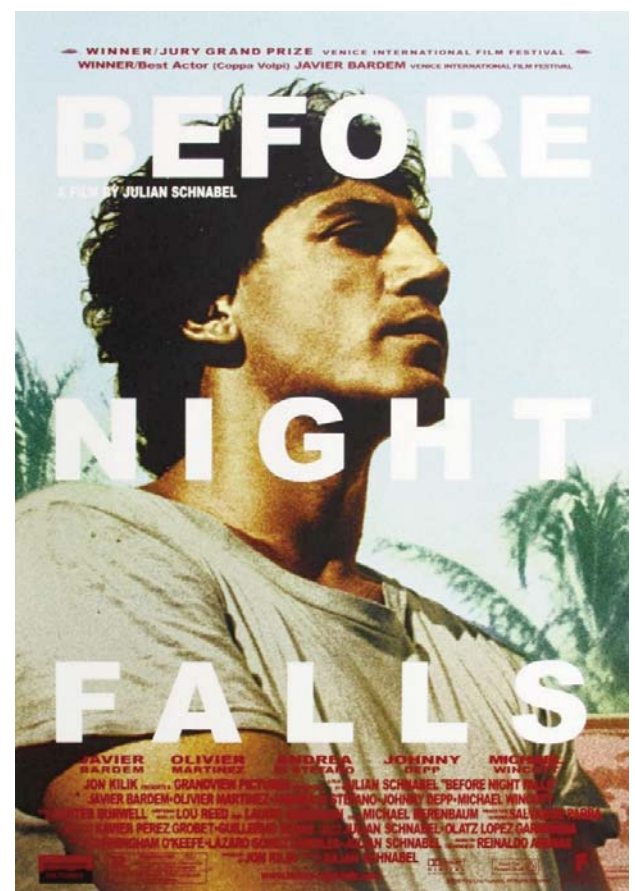




film chronicled the lives of separate but intricately intertwined gay men. Throughout the play Kushner commented on religion, politics, philosophy, society, love, and death. He dramatized KS to illustrate the impact of AIDS on two central characters: Roy Cohn and Prior Walter. Cohn was based on the real-life attorney notorious for the historic United States (US) espionage trial and subsequent execution of the Rosenbergs. He was also a key figure in Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade to rid the US of communism. Cohn was portrayed as a homosexual, political conservative and unrestrained bully. To preserve his influence he remained closeted. After his doctor biopsied a KS lesion and informed Cohn of the implications, Cohn denied the true diagnosis and instead contended that the diagnosis was liver cancer. He refused to accept the stigma accompanying AIDS and elected to swap the diagnosis for a disease associated with alcoholism. The audience subsequently witnessed him fight for his last shred of dignity as AIDS slowly took control of his life. In addition, the character Prior Walter had AIDS manifested by a growing KS tumor on his right breast. Shortly after, his long time boyfriend Louis fled dreading Prior's future. Loneliness and disease slowly corroded Prior's soul inciting angelic visions.

The film version of the iconic rock musical *Rent* (2005) utilized KS to portray AIDS. Among a struggling group of bohemians living in Manhattan was a creative transvestite stricken with AIDS; the character Angel Schunard's skin was covered with KS as he died in the arms of his partner, Tom Collins.

Reflecting real life, women are also affected by KS in film. The dramatic portrayal of model Gia Carangi in *Gia* (1998) depicted a childish yet seductive young woman from Philadelphia in the 1980s as she ascended to the highest echelons of the modeling world. While this afforded her a lavish lifestyle, her indulgences led to a powerful drug addiction. After contracting HIV and covered in KS, she died at the age of 26. Another film, *The Informers* (2008) set in 1983 Los Angeles exemplified an elite society addicted to sex, drugs, and power. The film ended with a young woman, Christie, sunbathing on the beach. She was besieged with KS as she succumbed to death. Because the remaining characters were connected through sexual activity and intravenous drug use, her death served as an omen of the others' potential fates.





In contrast, several movies have addressed HIV without incorporating KS into the plot. *Breaking the Surface –The Greg Louganis Story* (1997) documented the struggles a gay Olympian had with his sexuality and HIV. He never exhibited KS. *The Cure* (1995), a widely released fictional film and *The Ryan White Story* (1989), a made for television movie based on real life events, chronicled the lives of hemophiliacs who acquired HIV through transfusions. These two films represented the typical absence of HHV-8 and KS in hemophiliacs. In addition, the independent movie *Kids* (1995) represented a sex-crazed younger generation ignorant about HIV. Cumulatively, perhaps to preserve their innocence, works involving children have spared characters from KS. Further, films have conveyed the skin manifestations of HIV through other diseases. For instance, *The Hours* (2002) portrayed the writer Richard Brown plagued with seborrheic dermatitis, a cutaneous condition exacerbated by HIV.

Films with KS content portrayed a time when the disfigurement of KS led to psychosocial turmoil in the characters with the skin disease as well as the greater society around them. In this context, healthy people were anxious when confronted by others exhibiting an abnormal appearance, and they avoided exposure out of fear of contracting the disease. This fear especially applied to KS in the 1980s and early 1990s when the public was still ignorant about HIV transmission. If suspected of AIDS via a KS lesion, a person was often treated like a biblical leper, and was actively avoided.

Skillful makeup artists accurately emulated the physical appearance of KS in these films, but some of the characters attempted to conceal their lesions (makeup to cover makeup) to avoid stares by hiding their HIV. They became prisoners in their homes or the hospital. A

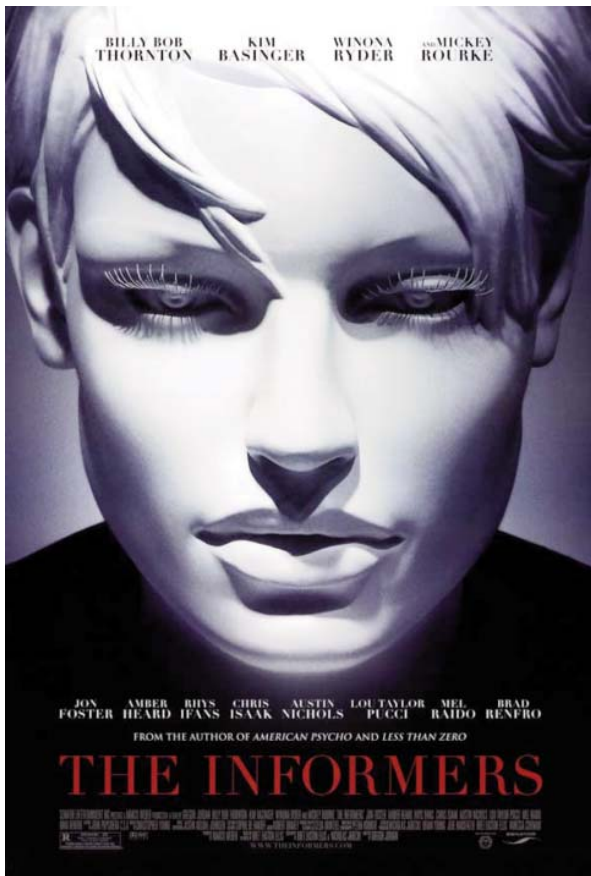
vicious cycle occurred: shame forced confinement and the resulting isolation protected victims against additional public scrutiny. While they battled an inevitably fatal disease, characters also avoided society's judgment, highlighting the emotional, psychological, and social implications of KS skin disease.

KS unified these film characters. The lesions were visual, often palpable, and embodied suffering. Regardless of the circumstances (sexual indiscretions or intravenous drug use) resulting in infection with HIV, all were afflicted with the same harsh disease. KS symbolized the impending loss of dignity as the disease progressed. These films associated KS with a character's demise: either the viewer witnessed or assumed eventual death. In these works the face was almost universally affected (Table 1). Society pursued perfect skin and these characters' cutaneous imperfections compelled an innate compassion and empathy from the audience.

Today, modern medicine usually prevents young people from dying from sexually transmitted infections. The historically chronic venereal diseases of syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia are still currently diagnosed, but their cure now resides in antibiotics. HIV is currently the most feared sexually transmitted infection because it continues to elude a cure. Thus, while viewers witness film characters succumb to HIV, a rudimentary virus, they are forced to acknowledge their own vulnerability. Moviemakers impart this self-recognition to the audience by using the visual paradigm of KS to illustrate HIV's impact on skin.

Like writers and other artists, filmmakers continue to infuse cutaneous disease into their works to help define characters. This visual artistic extension is well illustrated by archetypal KS representing the early era of HIV/AIDS. While HAART has virtually eliminated KS and





hopefully more effective preventive or even curative strategies will develop for HIV, Hollywood will continue employing KS, a pivotal lesion, to define homosexual and drug addicted cultures in the era when AIDS first arose. Inarguably, these films facilitated some public mindfulness about HIV, but more awareness is needed. Study of these films could potentially benefit medical students, health care professionals, and populations at risk for contracting HIV.

## References

1. Antman K, Chang Y. Kaposi's Sarcoma. *N Engl J Med* 2000; 342(14): 1027-1038.
2. Friedman-Kien AE, Laubenstein L, Marmor M, Hymes K, Green J, Ragaz A, Gottlieb J, Muggia F, Demopoulos R, Weintraub M, Williams D, Oliveri R, Marmer J, Wallace J, Halperin I, Gillooley JF, Prose N, Klein E, Vogel J, Safai B, Myskowski P, Urmacher C, Koziner B, Nisce L, Kris M, Armstrong D, Gold J, Mildran D, Tapper M, Weissman JB, Rothenberg R, Friedman SM, Siegal FP, Groundwater J, Gilmore J, Coleman D, SFollansbee S, Gullett J, Stegman SJ, Wofsy C, Bush D, Drew L, Braff E, Dritz S, Klein M, Preiksaitis JK, Gottlieb MS, Jung R, Chin J, Goedert J. Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis pneumonia among homosexual men — New York City and California. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 1981; 30: 305-308.
3. Beral V, Peterman TA, Berkelman RL, Jaffe HW. Kaposi's sarcoma among persons with AIDS: a sexually transmitted infection? *Lancet* 1990; 335(8682): 123-128.
4. Chang Y, Cesarman E, Pessin MS, Lee F, Culpepper J, Knowles DM, Moore PS. Identification of herpesvirus-like DNA sequences in AIDS-associated Kaposi's sarcoma. *Science* 1994; 266(5192): 1865-1869.



Alex Christopher Holliday, MD is a 2008 magna cum laude graduate of Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas where he majored in biomedical sciences and a 2012 cum laude graduate of The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), Galveston, Texas. He is currently completing his internship at UTMB and plans to pursue a career in dermatology. During medical school, his essay on Kaposi's sarcoma for the "Skin Diseases Depicted in Cinema" course taught by Dr. Wagner was awarded best essay for the 2011-2012 academic year, and was the inspiration for this original article for the *Journal of Medicine and Movies*.



Richard F. Wagner, Jr., MD is currently the Edgar B. Smith Professor of Dermatology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas, USA. In addition to serving as the Program Director for the Dermatology Residency Program, he also teaches several didactic courses in the medical humanities to upper level medical students. These classes focus on analysis of literary and cinematic skin disease depictions and their impact.