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Filmmaker Lary Campbell plays his short film, “My Mother, My Self” on his phone. It is the story of the day he told his mother he had HIV. The film is up for five awards at an international film festival in France. Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

FILM

# So history won’t forget: A story of a mother, a son, and a survivor’s heart

By Rita Giordano  
Staff Writer

The man looks straight at the camera. There is no music, no props. Just him, his eyes, and his voice.

“It’s December 1991, and today I told my mother I was diagnosed with HIV,” he says. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have.”

What follows is a story that took over 30 years for actor and filmmaker Lary Campbell, now 68, to tell. That he lived to tell it is no small thing. All of this could have been lost to silence.

But this week, it will be heard. *My Mother, My Self* will be shown at the Nice International Film Festival, in France, from May 13-15. The film and Campbell are nominated in five categories: best short film, best original screenplay, best actor, best director, and best editing.

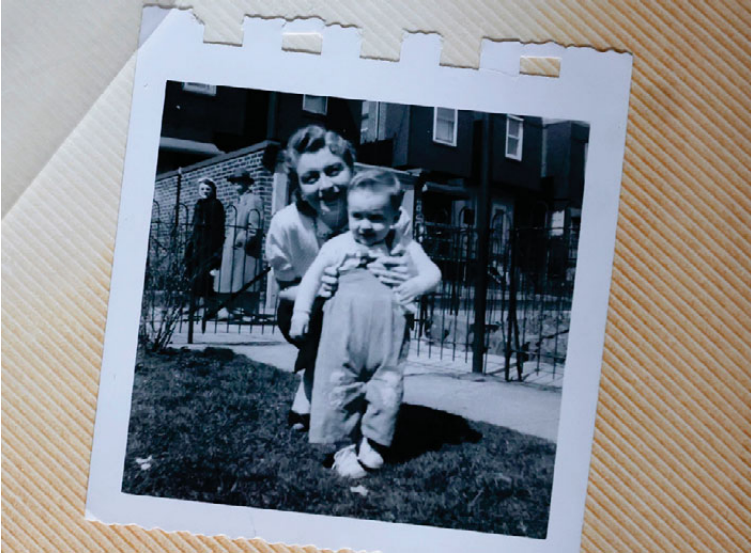
It is a quiet but powerful film about the relationship between a mother and son, as well as the legacy of trauma. Lurking in the shadows are the early years of the AIDS epidemic, a time when many fragile people were left by their families and society to cope and often died alone.

Campbell, who lives in Magnolia, grew up in North Philadelphia. His father, James, died when he was 10, and his mother, Elizabeth, struggled to raise five children on survivor’s benefits.

“We grew up on powdered milk because we couldn’t afford milk,” Campbell said. “My sister remembers neighbors leaving canned goods on our porch.”

Campbell said his mother “didn’t show her emotions. It was rough for her. Absolutely. But back then, you didn’t go to therapy.” Although she was a Catholic, she wouldn’t even go to confession, Campbell said. “She was not going to discuss feelings. She was not going to discuss personal stuff.”

She had her reasons to keep up her emotional guard, Campbell said. Campbell’s mother intervened



Campbell with his mother, Elizabeth “Betty” Campbell, in 1958 in Philadelphia. The family struggled after his father died when he was 10.

when her own mother tried to hang herself. Campbell’s mother confided in one of his siblings, but never discussed it with him.

Campbell found his own outlet in the theater from an early age. At Cardinal Dougherty High School, he took a filmmaking class and started making his own movies. His mother discouraged his aspirations.

“She would say stuff like, ‘This isn’t practical. Why do you think you’re going to make it? These people are special,’” Campbell said. “What mother doesn’t think their child is special?”

Yet she was supportive in other ways. When Campbell told his mother he was gay, she announced she was calling a family meeting with all his siblings. “Which was incredible,” he said. “She was very accepting.”

Campbell started working in home care and nursing, and lived in Los Angeles and New York City.

In the 1980s, in Manhattan, he was caring for patients who were mysteriously very sick and dying; the doctors didn’t know what was wrong with them. Some called it the “gay cancer” or GRID — Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. When a hospital in Manhattan was looking

to staff its first AIDS unit, Campbell said people were reluctant to work there. He was the second one hired and was there 10 years, until 1996.

During that time, he wrote an AIDS-related play called *Robby* that was produced Off Broadway. He also witnessed the horrors of the AIDS epidemic.

“We were taking care of people our own age. I would see people that I dated,” he said.

Sometimes, parents would come from far-off states and demand the hospital do something to save their dying sons.

It was during this time, tending to AIDS patients, that Campbell learned he was HIV positive.

“I had an insensitive doctor,” he recalled. “He told me over the phone, rather than bring me into the office, while I was at work. So I had to go take care of people and imagine myself in the bed being taken care of. It was very, very difficult.”

For many back then, that diagnosis was a death sentence. But Campbell said he would learn he was among a very fortunate, rare few. He is what is called an HIV elite controller — one of the less than 1% of individuals whose bodies can

control the virus replication using their own immune system in the absence of antiretroviral therapy.

But he didn’t know that when he called his mother to tell her he was HIV positive. The rest of that story is best for Campbell’s film to tell.

In the decades that followed, he studied film at the New School and worked as a nurse with psychiatric patients at Pennsylvania Hospital’s Hall Mercer crisis center for 20 years until he retired in 2019. He also earned a certificate in LGBTQ health care from Drexel University and lectured health professionals on how to better serve those patients.

Over those years, Campbell has made seven films. The latest, *Gary and Randy*, is still in production.

Except for some comedic shorts, *My Mother, My Self* is the only film where Campbell is also the star. Memorizing the lines — essentially a monologue — and performing something so intimate was not easy.

“The instinct is to avoid what’s personally painful rather than to confront it,” he said.

As both a witness to and survivor of the AIDS epidemic, he feels it’s important to add to the body of history and memory of that time.

“Here is something that was a serious trauma to everyone that experienced it, but a lot of kids who have been brought up since don’t know what it was like,” he said. “It dies with us when we die.”

While some of his other work has earned prizes, he said he’s honored that this film in particular is nominated for awards.

“My mother was always saying I wasn’t good enough, that I just didn’t have the talent. So it’s an affirmation — things that I believed about myself, that I can make a good film,” Campbell said. “And also because I have my mother’s eyes,” he added. “My eyes communicate very well. It would be ironic if I win something, and it’s all about her.”

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ADVICE

# What’s the real cost of modest diamond?

By Carolyn Hax  
Washington Post



Adapted from an online discussion.

**Question:** My fiancé and I have been together several years and are getting married next year. Marriage is not something he cares about, but he knows it’s important to me and is happy to get married. At his request, there was no proposal, and the wedding will be tiny and simple. This is all legitimately fine with me; however, I did decide I wanted an engagement ring. I know it’s easy to bash them for being a symbol of materialism and misogynistic traditions, but I’ve always loved jewelry, and having a physical symbol of my relationship is very meaningful.

My fiancé was on board until it came time to buy the ring; then he decided we should split the cost equally (which we do with all other expenses). This is really rubbing me the wrong way.

Money isn’t an issue; he’s well-paid and has no debt, and the ring I chose costs less than \$900. He just thinks it’s a silly thing to buy. I’ve given so much to this relationship — two cross-country moves for his career, hundreds of hours learning his native language so I can communicate with his family, taking on extra chores because he needs more downtime — and it hurts he won’t do this for me.

That gets me feeling slighted, but then I feel weird about: 1. Expecting a ring, or any gift in the first place. 2. Expecting a ring from someone who doesn’t care about marriage. It doesn’t help that every married woman I know has a ring her partner enthusiastically bought for her, plus a nice proposal, plus a wedding much grander than mine will be.

I feel like I’m being materialistic even though my wants are so much less than what everyone around me got. So then I just cycle through the confusion again. Am I ignoring my boyfriend’s personality and values to push societal expectations on him, or is he failing to show up for me?

**Answer:** He: Move cross-country for my career.

You: OK!

He: Move cross-country again for my career.

You: OK!

He: Learn a new language so you can communicate with my family.

You: OK!

He: Do more of the chores than I do because I don’t feel like doing them.

You: OK!

You: Marry me using a symbolic piece of jewelry that means a lot to me and costs less than \$900.

He: I don’t care, so fine, but you pay half even though I can easily afford it because I think what you value is stupid.

You have your answer, screamingly loud and clear, don’t you? And it has nothing to do with marriage, materialism, or symbols.

Same answer, another way: There are many wonderful men out there. Use what you learned here to hold out for one who loves you completely and values your happiness equally. Give yourself a chance to feel that.

**Readers also would like a word:**

- He thinks it’s “silly,” and he can still think that. But to be so dismissive of what you think, feel, and want does not bode well for the future.
- What your too-cheap-to-buy-a-stinking-ring fiancé is saying is, “If it’s not important to ME, it’s not important.” This will not change.
- This is the beginning of the rest of your life. He is telling you right now that he does not care about you enough to even consider why a symbolic ring might be important to you. Why are you wasting your precious time with this guy?

Chat with Carolyn Hax online at noon Fridays at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

tellme@washpost.com

# Springsteen biopic taps Jeremy Strong for off lead

By Zoe Greenberg  
Staff Writer

Jeremy Strong, the Emmy-winning actor who played eldest son and troubled soul Kendall Roy on HBO’s hit show *Succession*, is in talks to star in the much-anticipated Bruce Springsteen film *Deliver Me From Nowhere*. Strong would play Springsteen’s longtime manager Jon Landau, a development first reported by Variety.

Springsteen will be played by Jeremy Allen White, who is currently starring in the TV show *The Bear* (and a Calvin Klein underwear campaign).

The movie *Deliver Me From Nowhere* is based on Warren Zane’s 2023 book of the same name. It tells



Jeremy Strong, pictured here in 2022. Richard Shotwell

the story of Springsteen making his 1982 album *Nebraska*, which The Inquirer described at the time as “quiet, understated and sobering,” sharing “[Woody] Guthrie’s sense of Old Left liberalism and outrage, the idea that society can be responsible

for people’s welfare, or can drive them over the edge.”

Springsteen recorded the album alone in a rented room in Colts Neck, N.J., while he was separately recording *Born in the U.S.A.* with the E Street Band. The pared-down music on *Nebraska* was rooted in his lonely grappling with fame and childhood demons.

Both Springsteen and Landau are involved in making the film, which will be directed by Scott Cooper. It is set to begin shooting in the fall, after White wraps *The Bear* in June, and will have a global release. Before that, Strong will appear as President Donald Trump’s onetime mentor, attorney Roy Cohn, in the forthcoming film *The Apprentice*.

Strong is known for his intense method-style of acting. Though

*Succession* was often a dramatic comedy, Strong did not see his character as funny, and did not play him as such. He described his acting process as “identity diffusion” in a New Yorker profile that went viral in part because of Strong’s serious take on his work.

“If I have any method at all, it is simply this: to clear away anything — *anything* — that is not the character and the circumstances of the scene,” he told the New Yorker. “And usually that means clearing away almost everything around and inside you, so that you can be a more complete vessel for the work at hand.”

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