



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the German AIDS Foundation's 25th gala opera night
in Berlin on 3 November 2018**

"Do you mind this music, Joe?" "Do you like opera?"

"I'm not that familiar with opera, Andrew."

"This is my favourite aria. It's Maria Callas. "It's "Andrea Chénier" by Umberto Giordano."

Many of you will know this film dialogue. While the two protagonists are speaking with each other, background music has slowly started playing and after the first bars by the orchestra, we hear how a woman's voice begins singing an aria. No one who has seen this scene will ever forget it. It is perhaps the most moving scene in the film "Philadelphia", which was probably the first Hollywood film to tackle the topic of HIV and AIDS.

As we are at the opera this evening, let us stay with this scene for a minute. I believe it can tell us quite a lot about why we are here this evening.

First of all, the patient, played by Tom Hanks, walks through his apartment attached to a drip. He is visibly ill, and yet he is not merely a patient. He has received a death sentence, and he knows that. But most importantly, he is alive – with all his feelings and passions, especially his passion for music and opera, with his own story and unique character.

He asks his lawyer, who is visiting him, "Can you hear the heartache in her voice? Can you feel it, Joe?" It seems as if the sick man can perceive very different levels of emotion and understanding than his visitor, who watches and listens with amazement.

And the music, the aria "La mamma morta", gives the sick man hope and profound solace. And so he says aloud the words of the aria as Maria Callas sings them, especially in the part when love itself speaks and says: "Live, still. I am life.... You are not alone..."

And maybe some of you will also recall that Tom Hanks is filmed the entire time from above, as if a higher power is observing him from the perspective of the heavenly love described in this aria.

One simply cannot overestimate the importance of this film. "Philadelphia", and especially this scene, talks about the greatness of each and every person, which cannot be lessened by illness, about their incomparability and uniqueness. The film had a tremendous impact. It sent a strong message against homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals.

And it served as a major and special motivation in the fight against AIDS. It made us realise that every sick person is a human being with passions and a longing for consolation, love and recognition. And that is why the fight against HIV and AIDS, like every fight against an incurable disease, is the fight for the dignity of the individual, a fight to enable each and every person who has been infected to live a respected and self-determined life for as long as possible.

Why am I talking about "Philadelphia" today? You have probably already guessed that it's because the film was first shown in the cinema exactly 25 years ago, in 1993. And – perhaps not entirely coincidentally – this gala opera evening for the German AIDS Foundation is also taking place for the 25th time. Not only is urgently needed money being raised for the 25th time, the event is also helping to raise awareness of what AIDS means for our country and the world, what this disease means for those affected and their loved ones, and what one can do about it!

When the first reports on the human immunodeficiency virus and AIDS, the disease it led to, were published almost 40 years ago, public reaction ranged from amazement to shock. People just didn't know what to think. Silence and taboos surrounded this mysterious and frightening illness, which was mainly associated with sexuality.

Taboos and silence remain obstacles to effective prevention and treatment.

To this day, education and awareness-raising remain two of the main tasks in the fight against HIV and AIDS. One can carry out these tasks in the way I described using "Philadelphia" as an example, that is, with great pathos and emotion.

But one can also take a funny and cheeky approach that breaks taboos, like the unforgettable Federal Centre for Health Education advertisement of 1989 in which a cashier calls out loudly to her colleague, "Tina, how much do the condoms cost?" This one sentence by Hella von Sinnen and this advertisement probably did more for prevention and effective protection against infection than many serious rules of conduct.

Education and awareness-raising remain key tasks in the fight against AIDS, particularly for each new generation of young people. That was the driving force and motivation of the German AIDS Foundation from the very start. What now works better here is not found in many parts of the world, where HIV and AIDS are still virtually ignored or treated as a taboo, where conspiracy theories are used to explain the causes and where infection is sometimes even seen as divine retribution. As a result, protection and prevention are wantonly obstructed or at least neglected. Particularly in view of this situation, new cases of infection must be drastically reduced urgently. Education remains the key to that.

By the way, people also need to be informed about the great advances in treatment. Of all global infectious diseases, HIV has – I suspect – been researched most intensively in the past decades. Within a period of just a few years, scientists were able to provide successful treatments. If treatment starts in time and proves successful, many people with HIV can now live a normal life and will not contract AIDS.

In other words, we can treat AIDS, we can treat it successfully, but we still cannot cure HIV. And that is why we must not forget the people with HIV who have to live with psychological and physical issues. The German AIDS Foundation remains a reliable source of help to people in great difficulties.

I would like to thank all those who provide support now and indeed at any other time. I am grateful to the German AIDS Foundation and the other foundations and aid organisations, the companies that step up to help, the well-known supporters from the cultural sphere and the media, the many voluntary helpers and all those who donate money.

AIDS is a dreadful fate for millions of people. And it remains a dangerous, fatal threat for millions of people. Endeavours to improve prevention and treatment – including funding for treatment – must therefore continue. However, we can look confidently to the future. The great advances in treatment options rightfully allow us to feel hopeful that further successes will follow. I regard this evening as a further, encouraging step on this path.

Allow me to conclude by once more saying thank you very much indeed to all those who play a part in providing help and ensuring that it continues to reach those in need.