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School of the Arts  
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RESPONDING TO THE PLAGUE YEARS:

AIDS THEATRE IN THE 1980S

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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*Dedicated to Robert Chesley*  
*And all those who went before...*

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## Abstract

RESPONDING TO THE PLAGUE YEARS: AIDS THEATRE IN THE 1980'S

By Jason V. Campbell, M.F.A

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes  
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first discovered in 1981 and consequently changed United States history. Initially, it affected the gay community, and the United States Government did not actively combat the spread of the disease for the first four years of the epidemic. In response to a need for education, the theatre community took it upon itself to raise awareness about the disease. Artists such as Robert Chesley and Larry Kramer created pieces of theatre that helped society deal with AIDS.

This thesis explores the AIDS theatre canon while focusing on two major works: Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* and Larry Kramer's *The*

*Normal Heart*. I also created a class on AIDS theatre that I taught in the fall semester of 2008 at Virginia Commonwealth University. Information on the process of teaching the class as well as the class outcome is also addressed.

## Introduction

On July 3, 1981 *The New York Times* ran an article entitled “Rare Cancer seen in 41 Homosexuals.” It was the first national article produced about AIDS, and at the time, no one knew that this “cancer” would become an incurable disease that would kill millions of people around the world. Even at the time of the article, AIDS had already taken multiple lives. Jan Zita Grover gives an excellent definition of AIDS in her article “AIDS: Keywords.” :

What is now called AIDS was first pieced together in 1981, when physicians in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, some of whom had noted long-term enlarged lymph nodes (persistent generalized lymphadenopathy) in many of their gay clients as early as 1979, began seeing gay men with cases of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) and Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS), a cancer of the blood vessels that usually follows a slow and relatively benign course and had most often been found among Central Africans and elderly men of Mediterranean origin (18).

In the early 1980s, AIDS became known as Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) and was considered a gay problem, only affecting homosexuals, until 1985 when President Reagan finally addressed the issue (even though it began appearing in heterosexual Haitians as early as 1982). Gary Bauer, President Reagan’s assistant was quoted as saying, “It hadn’t spread into the general population yet,” in regards to why Reagan’s

administration addressed the issue four years after the fact (qtd in Grover 23). Even public health officials in the US did not make a nationwide effort to inform the population about how AIDS was spread until after 1986. Reagan is actually quoted at the American College of Physicians as saying, “When it comes to preventing AIDS, don’t medicine and morality teach the same lessons?” (qtd. in Grover 27). By 1986, the United States alone saw 13,172 cases of the disease and close to 5,000 deaths (www.cdc.gov). Gay Related Immune Deficiency was renamed Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in July of 1982. The media did not accurately, substantially or even seriously cover issues about the disease until news of Rock Hudson’s AIDS diagnosis and subsequent death in 1985.

Though I was only a year old when AIDS first entered the mainstream media, I had no idea how its mysterious and fatal grip would continue to affect me throughout my life. Gay culture (not to mention mainstream society) has been redefined by the effects of AIDS and HIV. I cannot remember a play or movie dealing with gay characters that does not at least touch upon HIV/AIDS. I remember ad campaigns trying to help me and my friends make the “right decisions” as we entered puberty and I also remember the numerous urban legends of people contracting AIDS by sitting on a pin at a movie theatre or by putting their fingers into a change slot at a payphone only to prick themselves on an infected needle. AIDS has completely changed my way of life through extremely evident as well as subtle means. And it seems that after a quarter of a century, AIDS is unfortunately not going away anytime soon.

Growing up gay in the age of AIDS has certainly affected me a lot more than the average youth. My fears and misunderstandings of the disease have always remained in

the shadows of my mind, and I often wonder how my life would have been different without the threat of this incurable disease. As a participant in the theatre, I also realize the overwhelming affect AIDS has had on the world of the performing arts. Artists in the prime of their careers were dying in droves; yet from this disease, we have gained a new canon of works that only exist because of AIDS.

As an undergraduate at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I was required to take a 200 level English course that focused on writing a research paper. I was allowed to select any topic, and simply had to argue my point of view, with support of research. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write about the theatre. I hold my bachelor's degree in Theatre Education and, at the time, I was planning on continuing to study theatre at the graduate level. I also remember being interested in queer theatre and theory and starting to read as many plays as I could on the subject. I realized as I read such plays as Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, Harvey Fierstein's *Safe Sex*, and even more obscure pieces such as Victor Bumbalo's *Tell*, that there is a significant facet of modern queer theatre that deals with the AIDS epidemic. I immediately went to my undergraduate theatre history professor and Director of Graduate Studies at VCU, Dr. Noreen Barnes, and started a dialogue with her that continues today.

From Dr. Barnes I learned about this huge canon of works that has sprung from AIDS and even a study in the shift from earlier AIDS drama to the more contemporary pieces of the 1990s to today. I began to seek Dr. Barnes' advice as I wrote my paper and was even able to interview her, since she was living and working in professional theatre in

San Francisco in the early 1980s, at the time when the disease first entered the United States.

My conversation with Dr. Barnes continued as I applied to start graduate work at Theatre VCU. Through Dr. Barnes, I have realized that theatre history is alive all around me, and that the early years of the AIDS epidemic were honestly not that long ago. As I think back to 1981 when the New York Times ran the first article on the disease, I acknowledge that I was only a year old, but the fact is I was *alive* during this life-changing time.

That undergraduate paper fueled a passion in me to study as much as I could about the AIDS theatre canon. My English 200 project has now been revised to become the first chapter in this thesis, and as a graduate student, I even created and taught a survey class on theatre's response to the AIDS epidemic which I also address as part of this project.

Through my research and teaching of my AIDS and theatre class, I have discovered a love of some of the earlier works of the 1980s. I am specifically moved by playwrights who wrote the first AIDS plays as a means of educating society about the disease as well as raising money for research. I have chosen to look at Robert Chesley and his play *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* along with Larry Kramer and his piece, *The Normal Heart*. Both of these playwrights were among the first to stage dramas dealing with AIDS, and it was their courage and diligence that became a foundation for the entire AIDS theatre canon. All too often, these earlier plays are overshadowed by more well-known works such as Tony Kushner's award winning two-part epic, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*; however I believe we must not lose sight of the

influences all of the earlier theatrical works held on every playwright to come. I attempt, in my own way, to pay tribute to these pioneers of the American stage.

I have also had the privilege of researching through many different methods including conversations with friends and family members of the late Robert Chesley (who I address in Chapter 2). Speaking with those who were closest to him has truly brought his memory alive for me, and this project has taken on a new meaning. My research has become very personal, as I have read countless plays, biographies, and news articles. It has become something that I feel very proud of.

As I begin the process of sharing my research on theatre and its response to the AIDS epidemic, I would like to start by acknowledging the power of the disease, at least in how it has changed the lives of so many people. We will never know what material those who have died may have given us, but we are left with works to educate, activate, intervene for and grieve with those who have gone before us. AIDS theatre learns from those who have suffered and sheds light on those who live in society's shadow. I hope that my research may illuminate some of these ideas as I continue to understand the effects of AIDS.

I have been particularly moved by the personal articles and journal entries I have read, and I feel a connection to the men who were my age during the early years of the pandemic. They were innocent; not knowing how the choices they were making would affect their future, or lack there of it. As I continue my research, I have also begun to find early photographs of People Living With AIDS (PWAs) and am deeply moved by the physical lesions that testify to the disease. I am fascinated by the early years of the

epidemic and the gay men who faced the unknown and often impending death with dignity and courage. After years of living in the margins, the survivors of the Stonewall Riot began to create a place for themselves at society's table. The AIDS epidemic helped gays and lesbians find their voice, yet it is a shame it took an incurable disease to do so.

My work is part tribute to my gay brothers, and part exploration of how AIDS changed the role of homosexuality within society through a focus on the theatre. I hope that my readers will sense the passion that fueled my research and words while gaining a new respect for theatre's powerful role in our society.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **AIDS and Theatre**

The 1980s became known as “the plague years” as thousands of gay men began to die annually. New York and San Francisco were particularly hit with overwhelming death rates due to each city’s high number of gay inhabitants. The performing arts world, and especially the theatre became a public medium to address the issue of the disease in order to create awareness, as well as raise money for research and act as a political voice to speak out against the current government. In a turbulent time of such issues as California’s Proposition 6 (a law attempting to ban all homosexual teachers and anyone who “supported” them from working in the state), the theatre community, with its high concentration of homosexuals, became a way in which gay men especially could speak out about the loss within their community.

*The New York Times* may have been the first major newspaper to address the issue of AIDS; however, subsequent articles on the disease were few and far between. The United States media did not actively address the issue until news of Rock Hudson’s death from AIDS in 1985. A study by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International and The Kaiser Family Foundation shows from 1981 to 1984 there were, on average, 125 articles about AIDS a year in major news sources. The study specifically reviewed ten

major newspapers and television news shows including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *CBS Evening News*. It concluded that these major news sources jumped from 125 articles a year to 2,500 stories in 1985 with news of Rock Hudson's AIDS diagnosis. In fact, stories pertaining to Rock Hudson's illness accounted for 175 of the 2,500 news stories of 1985 (Brodie 2). The sensationalism of this celebrity's diagnosis far outweighed the deaths of countless AIDS victims before him.

It is not surprising that theatre took the lead in bringing AIDS awareness to the world; in fact, the theatre has always been a place for social commentary. From early Greek drama, such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, in which the women decide to withhold sex until their husbands end the war between the Athenians and the Spartans, playwrights have used the art of theatre as a means of voicing their own ideas about government and society.

The AIDS crisis became an opportunity for new creative works that mirrored events of the time. Dr. Douglas Crimp, professor of art history and visual/cultural studies at the University of Rochester, includes a quote from Michael Denny of St. Martin's Press in his introduction to *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism*. Denny states, "We're on the verge of getting a literature out of this [AIDS] that will be a renaissance." Later Crimp uses Richard Goldstein, writer for the *Village Voice* to support this claim. Goldstein asserts, "In an ironic sense, I think that AIDS is good for art. I think it will produce great works that will outlast and transcend the epidemic" (4-5). Although AIDS

may still be a worldwide problem, the many plays of the 1980s created a means of communication and education for a society dealing with “the plague.”

Playwrights wrote early AIDS plays as a means of educating the gay community about a disease that was proving itself to be fatal. By 1984, New York alone had already seen 1,096 new AIDS cases and 864 deaths from the disease (“AIDS in New York”).

David Román, English Professor at the University of Southern California and author of *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, claims that “these early AIDS plays set out to inform audiences of the physical, emotional, and social effects of AIDS” (44). Playwrights honored their many friends and loved ones who were infected and dying from the disease with these works, and in some cases the playwrights wrote from the perspective of being diagnosed with AIDS themselves.

*One*, written by Jeff Hagedorn, is one of the first known pieces of theatre dealing with AIDS. This thirty-minute monologue depicted a man living with AIDS and premiered in a Chicago gay bar on August 14, 1983. In September of 1984, *Warren*, by Rebecca Ranson, premiered at the Seven Stages Theatre in Atlanta and is considered the first play to depict a gay man who ultimately dies of the disease. Also in 1984, Theatre Rhinoceros produced, *The A.I.D.S. Show*, a series of vignettes about AIDS created by a group of San Francisco artists, and Robert Chesley’s *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* became the first AIDS play to premiere in New York.

*One* is considered the start of the AIDS theatre genre. In this monologue, the actor attempts to connect with the audience by showing that the disease affects everyone. *One*’s author, Jeff Hagedorn explains, “everything I was reading seemed to ignore the fact that

these patients were people, seemed to imply that the moment they acquired this disease they became less than human” (qtd. in Román 47). *One* directly deals with the issue of AIDS by creating the first character to be diagnosed with the disease. In the monologue, an unnamed gay man has a conversation with the audience in which he ponders everything from who might have infected him, to who he might have infected himself. *One* shows its audience that anyone could contract the disease.

Unlike *One*'s perspective of a person living with AIDS, Rebecca Ranson's *Warren* details the responses of the friends and family of a man who is diagnosed and ultimately dies from the disease. The character's death is chronicled as the first AIDS related death in theatre, and the one-act begins to capture an audience response to the issue of caring for those diagnosed with AIDS. By portraying characters that are dealing with the loss of a friend or loved one with AIDS, Ranson forces her audience to see the truth behind the disease: it affects everyone, not just those who are diagnosed. *Warren* was subsequently produced in Atlanta, Honolulu, Rochester, Philadelphia and New Orleans (Román 51). The play itself, as well as productions around the country, illustrated the fact that AIDS was occurring everywhere, not just major cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York.

Theatre Rhinoceros produced one of the first AIDS play in San Francisco. *The A.I.D.S. Show (Artists Involved with Death and Survival)* was produced in 1984 for the Democratic National Convention. The project consisted of skits ranging from comedy to tragedy and even melodrama and camp, in an attempt to report the latest information on the disease. The show toured communities throughout the country to “raise AIDS

consciousness in a gay-affirming and sex-positive manner” (Román 54), meaning gay men were not blamed for the spread of the disease and sex was not portrayed as an evil act. The company used the show as a form of guerilla theatre, creating impromptu performances in parks and bars throughout the United States. Erik MacDonald, in his article, “Theatre Rhinoceros: A Gay Company” states, “In this climate of hysteria, projects like *The A.I.D.S. Show* stand out as example of hope and light. It is a spirit of resistance confined not just to the theatre community” (91). *The A.I.D.S. Show* was created in such a way that vignettes could be added or changed to adapt to modern information about the disease. By constantly updating its information, Theatre Rhinoceros played an integral role in providing up to date facts about AIDS.

Robert Chesley’s *Night Sweat* centers on an underground gay suicide club where gay men go to die and have the “experience” of their choice. This dark and very sexual piece argues for gay men to continue living and loving (physically and emotionally) regardless of the disease. It was the first full-length play to deal with AIDS, yet it was not received well in New York and is often over-shadowed by more mainstream pieces like Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and William Hoffman’s *As is*. As David Román explains, “The combined effects of the play’s non-realist form with the play’s graphic display of sadomasochism, suicide, and despair alienated audiences eager for the more positive and/ or heartwrenching AIDS representations of *The A.I.D.S. Show*, *Warren*, or *One*. In a city besieged by AIDS, a play about a suicide service for gay men with AIDS was bound to be dismissed” (56). *Night Sweat* in many ways became an example of

preaching to the converted as it was created specifically for gay men. Its graphic depictions of sex onstage limited its audience.

These four productions established AIDS as a reputable theatrical subject that could transcend bars, clubs and smaller gay theatres and ultimately succeed in mainstream venues such as Broadway. Román states, “These early plays set the stage for the phenomenal critical success of the two most widely recognized AIDS plays of the 1980s” (58). These plays were William Hoffman’s *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*. *As Is* was performed at Broadway’s Lyceum Theatre, and *The Normal Heart* became the longest running show at the Public Theatre. Though both plays were extremely different, each responded very directly to the issue of AIDS. Dr. Joel Shatzky, professor of English at New York State University, in his article “AIDS Enters the American Theatre: *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*” explains that “it is precisely because neither playwright tried to treat the AIDS epidemic in symbolic terms or to compromise his portrayal of gay men that these dramas have had such an electrifying effect on audiences” (134). Both plays were very well received by New York audiences and became the first major productions dealing with HIV/AIDS. With New York being the hub of the theatre community, both *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* brought national attention to the subject of AIDS.

William Hoffman’s *As Is* explores AIDS from a human standpoint. His play illustrates the relationship between two men who were romantically involved before splitting up. During this time of separation, one character contracted AIDS from another lover. The play revolves around this character, Rich, and his coming to terms with the disease as well as rekindling his relationship with his former lover, Saul. These two

characters depict the love between two men as they struggle to deal with family disapproval, discriminatory hospital staff and society's prejudice toward homosexuals and persons living with AIDS. In Don Shewey's introduction to the anthology, *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays* he writes, "With remarkable economy, Hoffman combines medical information, political background, social history of gay New York, and a catalogue of the shifting emotions that AIDS can produce in the people who have it and those who care for them" (xxv). Hoffman's work portrays the emotional and human side behind AIDS. Various characters lament a loss of sexual innocence in the time of AIDS while presenting a history of the disease in New York.

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* is very different. The play revolves around Ned Weeks, a character based on the author himself, who attempts to educate gay men about the AIDS crisis. The drama is essentially a history play as it details selected events in New York AIDS history from 1981 to 1984. Kramer attacks various authority figures that he feels were responsible for the spread of the disease. He blames New York City mayor Ed Koch, the National Institute of Health, the Center for Disease Control and the Gay Men's Health Crisis for directly and indirectly helping the spread of AIDS. As a gay man himself, Kramer created even more controversy by blaming homosexual promiscuity. He spoke out against the gay sexual rights movement by claiming that gay men must create monogamous relationships in order to stop the spread of the disease. His main character asks, "Why didn't you guys ask for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity?" (85). No one is left untouched in Kramer's polemic response to

AIDS. The New York media covered the play and its outspoken playwright extensively, creating more attention to the effects of the disease.

Both *As Is* and *The Normal Heart's* critical acclaim helped open doors for future AIDS dramas. *As Is* alone grossed more than \$90, 000 in its first six months on Broadway, and “a survey conducted by the League of New York Theatre Producers and Theatre Owners discovered that, overwhelmingly, audiences attended *As Is* to learn more about AIDS” (Román 60). Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* brought national attention to the disease through its very controversial claims and subsequent productions throughout the United States. For the first time, AIDS received national attention. The theatre was established as a reputable source for dealing with and understanding the epidemic, and AIDS plays were continually created and produced around the country in the 1980s and 90s.

Our understanding of AIDS has changed since the 1980s, yet playwrights continue to write social commentary on the disease. In the early nineties, with the emergence of new drug treatments such as AZT, AIDS patients began to live much longer lives. In response, audiences began to see a shift in the types of dramas dealing with AIDS. The plays of the 1990s began to use more unrealistic styles such as camp and farce as playwrights began laughing at AIDS. Theatre historians now identify earlier AIDS plays as “first-generation” and the later AIDS plays of the 90s and beyond as “second-generation” AIDS plays (a term first used by theatre critics Dr. Noreen Barnes and Steve Winn); however, the core function of these plays remain the same: to educate and help deal with the issues of the disease. Nowadays, AIDS theatre employs all sorts of styles, with most trying to make light of the situation. As Dr. Barnes puts it, “playwrights began

finding positive ways to deal with being positive” (Barnes). AIDS was simply not going away, and the theatre began to reflect this fact.

In response to this shift, Therese Jones explains the evolution of second generation AIDS plays in her anthology, *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances*. She explains that playwrights used “laughter that expressed denial and affirmation, that transformed terror into comedy” (ix). New York began seeing hits such as Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey* in which one homosexual man chooses to completely give up sex in order to combat AIDS. He later falls in love with a man who has the disease and ultimately decides to attempt a relationship with him. Characters such as Mother Theresa and Jeffrey’s friend Darius who is a dancer in *Cats* the musical (complete with costume), fill this piece with humor.

Second-generation AIDS dramas also began to center around characters that no longer die as the curtain falls. Perhaps the most famous second-generation AIDS play is Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. This epic drama, started in 1988 and produced in 1990-91, centers on Prior, an HIV positive gay man whose live-in lover of over four years, Louis, deserts him after finding out about his diagnosis. The two-part play illustrates the difficulty in living with and caring for those who have the disease, as well as creates a strong argument for treatment options while employing humor to help audiences digest the realistic depiction of AIDS in the play.

This play is known for ending with Prior still alive. Even in the epilogue, which takes place four years later (1999), Prior continues to live with the incurable disease. Kushner was one of the first playwrights to create a character who physically dealt with

AIDS yet survived. Patrick Pacheco interviewed Tony Kushner in 1993. In the interview, entitled “AIDS, Angels, Activism, and Sex in the Nineties,” Kushner admits, “It was important to me to create a character with AIDS who was not passive, who did not die at the end, but whose illness was treated realistically” (51). *Angels in America* also gives insight into new drug therapies such as AZT. Kushner specifically argues the importance of seeking medical attention and taking care of oneself. Prior may view himself as weak, yet he continues to go to the doctor, exercise, and take care of his body. This illustration creates a strong argument for AIDS patients seeking necessary medical attention and accomplishes Kushner’s goal of educating society about new AIDS treatment options. Additionally, Kushner shows the difficulties of those who are caring for AIDS patients. He states, “That’s another thing I felt was missing from representations of the health crisis [AIDS]: how tremendously hard it is for people to take care of people” (Pacheco 57). By showing Louis’ inability to watch Prior battle the disease, Kushner creates yet another form of art imitating life. “I’ve seen the entire spectrum of behavior in terms of people taking care of other people,” Kushner admits (Pacheco 57). Kushner’s creation of a character who walks out on his lover at a time of terrible calamity established yet another argument demonstrating that this issue affects everyone, not just those living with and dying from the disease.

Tony Kushner, similarly to Larry Kramer, used his writing to speak out against the government. Kushner asserts, “I was shocked by the response to AIDS by Reagan and Bush. I couldn’t believe that someone as conscious of PR as Reagan could be so blind as to what history is going to make of the way he behaved” (Pacheco 59). In Part One of

*Angels in America*, Louis questions, “Why has democracy succeeded in America?” Later, he discusses the Bush policy of tolerance for human rights. In an enraged monologue, Louis asserts:

You have Bush talking about human rights...bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it's not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred (Kushner 89-90).

Kushner very passionately stakes his claim against the government of the 1990s. His characters are well educated in the realm of politics and create a strong argument against anti-gay policies of that time.

The characters in *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's polemic response to AIDS, are also very well versed in the politics of their time. Throughout the play, Kramer calls gay men to action as his characters battle national and local governments as well as the medical profession for increased awareness and education about preventing AIDS. These characters directly respond to the government's reaction to the epidemic. The main character's heterosexual doctor, Emma, discusses governmental AIDS funding with another doctor in the following dialogue:

Emma: Five million dollars doesn't seem quite right for some two thousand cases.

The government spent twenty million investigating seven deaths from Tylenol. We are now almost into the third year of this epidemic.

Examining Doctor: Unfortunately the President has threatened to veto. As you know, he's gone on record as being unalterably and irrevocably opposed to anything that might be construed as an endorsement of homosexuality (Kramer 102).

The blatant and unapologetic inclusion of facts and opinions color the entire dialogue of Kramer's play. His characters, though often not extremely eloquent, are read when it comes to current information on the disease. Also in regards to the topic of AIDS funding, a gay character asks, "Why should they [the government authorities] help us- we're actually cooperating with them by dying" (Kramer 97). With over 250 productions worldwide by 1988 (Holden 3), Kramer's political voice calling for AIDS activism, spoke loud and clear. In a society where the President refused to utter the word "AIDS," playwrights were forced to draw attention to the effects of the epidemic. The fact that these plays were produced at a time when the government remained silent, illustrates the importance of theatre as a form of political action.

As I began my research on AIDS theatre, I found mostly works written by gay playwrights that specifically included gay characters and themes. At a time when religious leaders were calling AIDS, "God's wrath on homosexuals," it became evident to me that this new form of theatre was not only in response to the disease itself, but to the society that refused to acknowledge its effects on gay people as well. Many of the plays I have included were written by gay men, and may seem to only address the homosexual side of the issue. In fact, 1980s right wing society members began claiming AIDS theatre was written by gay men and only for gay men. In an article entitled, "Preaching to the

Converted,” Tim Miller, author and performer of *My Queer Body* and David Román argue against this claim. They write, “The necessity of responding to AIDS and the right-wing attacks on lesbian and gay culture has demanded immediate expressions in performance” (180). In truth, gay playwrights have attempted to portray the entire spectrum of the AIDS epidemic. For example, Harvey Fierstein’s one-act, “On Tidy Endings” (which ran on Broadway in 1987) describes an HIV positive woman whose husband left her for a man. She contracted the disease from her ex-husband and is forced to deal with his death. She also must divide his things between her and her husband’s male lover, along with cultivating a new marriage while being HIV positive. Similarly, Alan Bowne’s *Beirut* explores the relationship between an HIV positive man and the woman who loves him.

The AIDS epidemic swept across the nation with lightening speed; artists began creating works of theatre in an attempt to force awareness about the disease. These early plays, though simple in style and form, set the stage for more complex works to come. AIDS plays are still created today, though in many respects the plays have changed as understanding of the disease has changed. Playwrights have used works of theatre as elegies for the loss of loved ones as well as a call to action for those still alive. At a time when the government and medical profession would not acknowledge the disease or raise money for its research, the theatre community took matters into its own hands. Playwrights used theatre as it has been used for centuries, by imitating the realities of life so that society may learn from its mistakes as well as its accomplishments.

AIDS continues to serve as the central theme of many new works of theatre. Jonathan Larson’s *RENT* won numerous awards including the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for

Drama and continues to remain a staple of pop culture. Lately, film has become a new genre to deal with AIDS. Movie versions of plays such as *Angels in America*, *Jeffrey*, *Love! Valour! Compassion* and *RENT* have brought works of the theatre that deal with AIDS to an even broader audience.

The theatre community took a fatal, virtually ignored disease and forced society to address it. Playwrights, directors, actors and designers responded to the disease and those diagnosed with the disease with compassion, acceptance, anger, sadness, and even guilt. Audiences saw the entire spectrum of living with and dying from AIDS. Throughout it all, theatre presented a form of hope for a society that was under a plague.

Our society has certainly changed quite a bit since that *New York Times* article in 1981, but I often wonder how different our understanding of AIDS would be had theatre not taken a stand in the education and fight against the disease. I question how different my own life would have been if I was born 20 years earlier and whether or not I would have been one of the thousands of unknowing gay men to be infected and ultimately die from AIDS. I know for myself, I am eternally grateful for the plays that spoke out about the effects of AIDS on the gay community and society as a whole. AIDS theatre has helped show that in regards to this disease, we live because others died. The early AIDS plays of the 1980s created a foundation that has led to countless other theatrical productions. All of these AIDS plays will forever serve as tangible sources to help us all look back and learn from the past.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Robert Chesley**

“His unswerving ability to look at sexuality, in the light- or the dark- of the AIDS crisis is peerless, and we cannot afford to lose that voice. There is no one as articulate and passionate about the issues of gay male sexuality as Robert was as a dramatist. As a result, I’m in mourning. It’s ironic that he died the week that Madonna appears on television and discusses the issues of censorship, discrimination and homophobia. He was, in a way, our Madonna.”

- Michael Kearns on Robert Chesley

### **PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS**

As I write this chapter on Robert Chesley (the final chapter I am writing I should add), I sit in my apartment in Richmond, Virginia during one of the coldest days in years. Curled up on the couch with a blanket and my laptop, I feel as if I am about to write a

letter to a friend; for the process in which I have done my research on Chesley has become very personal.

I chose to write about this playwright for several reasons. First and foremost, he wrote the first full-length play to address the AIDS epidemic. His play, *Night Sweat* was produced over a year before the New York runs of the most famous AIDS plays, *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*. I also chose to write about Chesley because he is not as well known as other playwrights, yet his work provided a voice for the gay community as well as people living with AIDS. His plays, though essentially written by a gay man for gay men, gave insight into a disease that was wiping out an entire community.

When I began the process of researching Robert Chesley, I immediately hit a brick wall. There was simply not enough published information about him. I could certainly find some facts about his most famous plays, *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* as well as *Jerker or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty* (commonly referred to as simply, *Jerker*); however, there are not a lot of facts on the story of his life. Frustrated by my lack of research, I once again turned to my mentor, Dr. Noreen Barnes. As an acquaintance of Chesley, she put me in touch with one of his dear friends and colleague, Victor Bumbalo (who is also a playwright and author of another widely popular AIDS play entitled, *Adam and the Experts*). Through Victor I was given the number of Robert's sister, Joan Engelhaupt and between the two of them, I have been able to piece together a pretty accurate account of his life.

Through telephone calls and emails, I have had the opportunity to listen to countless stories about Chesley and the amazing life he led. The experience of sitting down and speaking with someone about true theatre history has been a remarkable opportunity. I am forever grateful for Joan and Victor's willingness to speak with me and share such an important person in each of their lives. My conversations with both of them have created a connection with my research that I never would have imagined. Robert Chesley (or Bobby, as his sister calls him) has become a real person to me, not someone I simply read about out of books. My only regret is that I did not meet him in person, for after hearing the stories of his life; I believe he would have been completely willing to speak with me himself. I believe he is someone who I would have loved to call a friend.

As I write this short biography on Chesley's life, I hope to honor his work and the remarkable person that he was. My conversations with both Joan and Victor became even more personal as I shared with them some similar stories between Robert's life and my own. This chapter is difficult in the fact that a part of me wants to keep this amazing experience to myself; yet Victor urged me in an inscription to an anthology of Chesley's work that he gave me, to "spread the word." So I will do just that, for Chesley's courage paved the way for people like me. I will forever be indebted to him and all that he did.

## **BEGINNINGS**

Robert Chesley was born on March 22, 1943 in Jersey City, New Jersey. His birth certificate was later changed to March 2 so that he could start kindergarten a year earlier (Engelhaupt). His mother Betty, father Leon, and older sister Joan lived outside of Jersey

City in Leonias, New Jersey until Betty and Leon divorced in 1948. After a bitter separation, Betty moved her and her two children to Pasadena, California where they remained through high school.

Robert Chesley did not like California for social reasons. He was bullied at public school, often called a sissy, and, at the age of twelve, even moved to Pakistan for a year with family friends on a fellowship. Talented in both visual and performing arts, Chesley took private lessons in piano and violin throughout his school career.

According to Joan Engelhaupt, Robert's sister, the family was of a lower economic status for the area they lived in, though she and her brother were unaware of that at the time. When Robert was around the age of fifteen or sixteen, his mother remarried to a man named Kenneth Rottger. Chesley did not get along with his stepfather for "interpersonal" reasons as Joan explained.

Though High School was a difficult time for Robert, he became good friends with a small click of students. His sister described the group as an artistic lot who went to art films together. Chesley did well in school although he did not really enjoy it. His sister explained the main reason he did not like his high school experience was due to the social difficulties he endured at the time. She describes Bobby as a boy who always knew he was different. His closest friends were also those that were unaccepted by the majority of their peers.

In 1960, Chesley entered Reed College in Portland, Oregon where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music. Not much information is known about his time at Reed

College, although his sister did say that Robert spoke with a counselor because he thought he might be gay. The counselor assured Chesley it was only a phase.

During his last year at Reed, Robert's first cousin Jeannie (now known as Hedezig) came to stay with him. She was unhappy with her current situation in New York City and wanted a change of scenery. The two ended up marrying after he graduated and moved to upstate New York where he taught wealthy yet troubled private school students at the Duchess School. There Chesley worked with kindergartners through eighth graders teaching a variety of subjects (Engelhaupt).

### COMING OUT

During a visit to New York City, Robert Chesley had his first known sexual encounter with a man. No information is known as to who this man was and the two were only together one time. Joan reminisced that the trip must have been important as Chesley was very devoted to his wife. She does not remember how quickly he told his wife about his desire to sleep with males, although Joan does remember Hedezig complaining about Chesley always wanting to bring men into their home. Chesley came out to his wife and school in 1976 after graffiti saying, "Chesley=Queer" was discovered on the Duchess School property. School administrators urged Chesley to quit in the best interest of the school (which he did) and his wife also divorced him as a result of his acknowledged sexuality.

With his failed marriage and lost job, Chesley moved to New York City where he began reviewing theatre for various papers including the famous, *New York Native*. He

also wrote for *Gay Community News*, *The Advocate*, and *Gaysweek*. While in New York, he came out to his mother and sister. After virtually telling everyone he knew, he realized he had not told his birth father. On father's day (sometime in his thirties), Robert called Leon Chesley to tell him he was gay and contact was re-established between the two.

While reviewing plays in New York, Chesley decided to begin writing his own theatrical works. According to his sister, "he decided he could write as well as those he was reviewing" (Engelhaupt). His first play, *Hell, I Love You* was written and produced in 1980 by San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros. This started his career as a playwright with works being produced in both New York and San Francisco. Around this time, Chesley met Victor Bumbalo (Chesley had reviewed one of Bumbalo's plays); and the two ultimately became good friends. With the production of *Hell, I Love You*, Chesley moved to San Francisco and began writing plays that would be subsequently produced in major cities across the United States and Canada.

### **AIDS ENTERS THE SCENE**

As described in chapter one, by the early 1980s, the gay community was suffering great loss due to what was originally called Gay Related Immune Deficiency. This disease, later to be known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) became the topic of Chesley's first full-length play entitled *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts*. The play is also considered to be the first full-length production about the disease. Originally produced in New York City by the Meridian Gay Theatre at Shandol Theatre on

May 24, 1984; the show was directed by Nick Deutsch. The play takes place in a gay assisted suicide club for HIV-positive men who choose erotic means of ending their lives.

The play did not receive the best reviews and was very shocking to the gay community at the time. Chesley describes its reception in his introduction to an anthology of his work, *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts* as saying, “Some people loved it, but even closest friends behaved as though I had placed something at their feet which it was best to step over and politely ignore. My best buddy told me he wished I had never written it” (10). Victor Bumbalo describes the opening night as very crowded and explains that the epidemic was just beginning to swell. He believes the reception was mixed because people were simply not ready for it; however, ready or not, Chesley had opened the door to AIDS in the theatre.

Other plays followed, the most popular and still widely produced *Jerker or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty* was staged in 1986 and opened a national controversy on censorship rights due to the graphic sexual content of the play. Scenes from the play were read on Los Angeles’ KPFK radio on Labor Day of that same year. The airing was heard by Rev. Larry Poland who reported the incident to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). A year later, the FCC urged the United States Justice Department to prosecute KPFK. This was the first censor effort by the FCC since 1975. The Justice department refused to prosecute the station on account that it was within the very specific FCC guidelines for that time. In response, the FCC

changed its guidelines making them broader and thus easier to prosecute those breaking its laws.

According to Robert's sister, he had no intentions of causing such a stir with *Jerker*. She goes on to explain that Chesley believed gay audiences would be the only ones to view his plays. His original reaction to the controversy was a desire to leave the country, but as the drama continued to unfold, he became angry. In the introduction to the play from *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts* Chesley explains,

*Jerker* had inadvertently caused a lot of damage. The whole fucking nation is worse off, and it's quite conceivable that lives have been lost that could have been saved if vital, direct information on the spread of AIDS had been available on the broadcast media. Nobody ever died from being offended, but prudery kills (72).

*Jerker* fulfills Chesley's main goal to celebrate gay sex in the age of AIDS. His plays always contain an element of sexuality that is often loved by the gay community yet misunderstood by others. Still, in many cases, even some members of the gay community seem to misunderstand Chesley's underlying theme of celebrating gay sex. In a *San Francisco Sentinel* review of the original production, Robert Julian, an openly gay critic writes,

I cannot conceive of a piece of theatre that more classically illustrates the narrow, confining, ghetto mentality that keeps the gay community separate from the rest of the world. It is my observation that the male gay community's obsession with the penis has been recently replaced by a fetish for disease. *Jerker* begins with the former, complete with male frontal nudity, and ends with the latter. In this respect,

Chesley seems to be giving his audience what it wants. But what is there here that uplifts the spirit, illuminates the consciousness, generates laughter, or inspires the audience to greater accomplishments in their own lives? Frankly, very little (19). Though misunderstood by society at large, Chesley's plays created a positive self-affirming depiction of gay sex. *Jerker* with its frank portrayals of sex onstage never once mentions the word AIDS. The two characters only interact over the telephone yet a relationship is established, enabling the audience to connect with the two men onstage. Chesley remained unapologetic of his work throughout his lifetime. Taking criticism in stride, he continued his personal and therefore political work as a playwright.

In response to attending Chesley's plays, Victor Bumbalo asserts that Chesley wrote for the theatre and not for film. His shows were very theatrical and the inclusion of sexual depictions onstage was part of his theatrical impulse. "Robert loved sex, it was a motor: a source of inspiration" (Bumbalo). Bumbalo believes Chesley used the device of theatre to its fullest. His collaborations with Nick Deutsch, director of his New York productions, were very creative, and according to his sister, he was always pleased to see his productions come alive.

### **KS LESIONS**

In April of 1988, Chesley began to find Karposii Sarcoma lesions on his body. As a practitioner of Sadomasochism (S&M) and a self-proclaimed "erotic liberationist," Chesley had decided not to be tested for AIDS. His sister explains, "there were so very few treatments for people with HIV that he didn't see the point in knowing his status. He

said that he would conduct himself as if he were HIV positive, in terms of protecting others, but didn't see any point in testing for it [himself]" (Engelhaupt). The strange purple spots led him to go to the doctor where he did in fact test positive for HIV/AIDS. He called his sister after he had been crying:

He asked me not to tell our mom, that he wanted to come down to L.A. in person to tell her, and that he was going to consult a therapist first as to the best way to break the news to her. I remember so clearly bringing him home from the airport and my mom arriving at my house in her Toyota Tercel, so overjoyed to see him, and my thinking, 'This is the last happy day she is going to have' (Engelhaupt).

Similarly Chesley called his friend Victor Bumbalo and broke the news. Robert consoled his friend by saying, "I've only got a few spots;" and according to Bumbalo, Chesley "handled his disease as he handled his life- quite eloquently." (Bumbalo). With his newly discovered positive status, Chesley began fighting even more for awareness and research for the disease. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* entitled "Faces of AIDS: Local Art World's Casualty List" explains:

Robert was certainly committed to his causes, says John Karr, who was the assistant director on *Night Sweat*. First they were gay causes; then the issues of his life. When he got AIDS, he came out with it immediately. Even when he had lesions, he felt duty bound to wear fewer clothes so that people could see what AIDS did (25).

Chesley himself even admits this fact in *The Advocate Magazine* saying, “Before being diagnosed with AIDS, I was writing plays for gay people, and everyone was welcome. Now I’m writing plays for people with AIDS” (NP).

As his fight with AIDS continued, Chesley felt obligated to show the physical effects of AIDS on his body. He was often photographed with his lesions showing, and a photographic essay by Mark I. Chester entitled, “Superman, Spandex and harddick” illustrates Chesley’s HIV status as well as his comfort with sex and the body. The images include Chesley putting on a tight superman outfit in which his erect penis is showing. His chest is covered in lesions, yet even when the superman suit shrouds his body, his penis still pokes through. Chester’s photographs are meant to show Chesley’s virility and strength despite his battle with AIDS (Silver 1). The disease took him quickly as it often did during the first ten years of the epidemic. He died on December 5, 1990 at San Francisco’s Mount Zion Hospital.

### **KEEP THE LIGHT SHINING**

Robert Chesley was a huge influence on the struggle not only for gay rights but also for the rights of people living with AIDS. Family and friends have described him as a warm and loving man who was generous in every meaning of the word. According to Victor Bumbalo, Chesley would help other playwrights whether it was financially or in spirit. In fact, Chesley helped Bumbalo produce his play, *Adam and The Experts*. Bumbalo goes on to describe Chesley as not being like other playwrights. “He was able to appreciate other people’s work and genuinely care about it” (Bumbalo). He had a love of

theatre as well as the gay community that propelled him to create works of art that could be enjoyed by all his gay brothers.

Sex was a source of inspiration for Chesley and evidence of this can be seen throughout his plays. According to his sister Joan, he wrote about personal experiences in a way that became political. He disliked the idea of outcasts within an already marginalized group and therefore included characters of drag queens and S&M practitioners in his works. Chesley was accepting and celebrating of all walks of life.

In his will, Robert Chesley left Victor Bumbalo money to continue writing. With this gift, Bumbalo started the Robert Chesley Foundation in 1992. Through this organization, Victor has been able to sponsor gay and lesbian writers at the Wurlitzer Foundation in New Mexico and hopefully foster the future generation of gay writers and activists.

Both Victor and Joan were thrilled with this research, as they each want to keep the memory of their friend and brother alive. “Robert was a wakeup call to the community,” says Victor Bumbalo. His spirit and courage to write about a group that he felt so closely a part of truly makes for an amazing human being. Who knows what wisdom we could have espoused from this prolific writer if he had not been taken from us so soon.

The history of the AIDS epidemic is cluttered with stories of performing artists dying in their prime. It is easy to become weighed down by the overwhelming sense of loss, yet at the same time, I personally am left with a sense of gratitude. Chesley found his voice through the platform of gay rights and AIDS. He has left us with over twenty-five plays to remember what it was like to live during the plague years. Sadness would exist if

we did not take the time to recall his gifts to our society. We must keep his message alive through the reading and writing about his works. I have realized that writers like Chesley can too easily fall through the cracks of history. I hope that through research such as this, we can continue to let their beacons of light shine through our often-apatetic society.

Chesley's powerful words should not be forgotten, and I am proud to help keep his memory alive.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **Larry Kramer**

“Writing is my politics, activism is my art. There is no difference. Words are my tools, to make you think a certain way I want you to think.”

- Larry Kramer

With the emergence of the AIDS disease, the 1980s became a turbulent time for many people throughout the United States. Though artists were dying in the prime of their careers; one artist did survive this devastating decade and lived to write about it. In fact, it was through the AIDS epidemic that Larry Kramer found his voice as an activist and as a playwright. *The Normal Heart*, Kramer’s most famous play, gives a blunt portrayal of the government, the medical profession, and gay men through the age of AIDS; but Kramer had not planned on becoming a playwright. His first love was the movie industry and surprisingly, he left a successful career as a screenwriter to become one of the most controversial men in American history. Kramer, who received everything from accolades to death threats, continued to be a voice against the government during the early stages of AIDS (Merla 24). Often loved by conservatives and hated by liberals (especially gay

men), Kramer became an AIDS activist fanatic in many respects, and he often seemed to alienate those who he was trying to help.

Regardless of how society felt about Kramer's jeremiad, the fact was (and in some cases still is) his voice was heard. It permeated his writing as well as his public appearances, but Larry Kramer did not always carry such a strong voice. In 1953, after his first month of classes at Yale University, Kramer attempted suicide, believing that he was the only gay student on campus (Arenson 1). This feeling of isolation stayed with Kramer throughout his life and is very evident in his plays.

### **EARLY YEARS**

Larry Kramer was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut on June 25, 1935. He was the second (and last) child of George Leon Kramer, a Jewish American, and Rea Sara Wishengrad, a Russian Jewish emigrant. Kramer's older brother, Arthur was born nine years earlier. George Kramer landed a job with the U.S. Treasury Department in 1941 and moved the family to Mt. Rainier, Maryland where Larry was ultimately introduced to theatre at the age of eight; he attended a puppet show at Washington's National Theatre (Long 236). As he continued to frequent the theatre, Kramer saw such actors as Boris Karloff in *An Inspector Calls*, Cornelia Otis Skinner in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Henry Fonda in *Mr. Roberts* and Mary Martin in *South Pacific*. His mother gave him the money for the tickets and bus fare, but his father called him a sissy and spoke of how disappointed he was that Kramer was not involved in more masculine activities such as sports (Merla 26). Family issues would follow Kramer throughout his life.

Kramer's love for the theatre led him to participate as a performer in several school productions, although his parents were much more interested in him becoming friendly with the children of the upper-class society with whom he attended classes. Mr. And Mrs. Kramer insisted Larry become a member of Pi Tau Pi, a fraternity of rich Jewish students. Kramer joined the fraternity and regularly attended meetings at the different mansions of each member, though he feared the time when it would be his turn to host a meeting in his parent's very small apartment on the lower-class side of town. Still, Kramer preferred his social life to his often-unstable home life. Kramer's parents fought constantly, yet he managed to graduate thirteenth in a class of 300 students.

In September of 1953, Larry Kramer entered Yale University, following in the footsteps of his father and brother. Kramer wanted to go Harvard, but his father refused to sign the financial aid forms; George Kramer made it clear that his son had no other choice but to attend his alma mater. Kramer did not adjust well to academic life. He entered Yale planning to major in French, yet he changed his major to German in order to work with one of his brother's past professors. In November of 1953, Arthur Kramer got married and Larry attempted suicide. In order to stay at the university, Kramer was required to seek psychiatric help.

Even under the care of a psychiatrist, Larry Kramer began a sexual relationship with his German professor in April of 1954 and thus experienced his first taste of reciprocal affection from another man. The professor asked Larry to spend the summer in Europe with him; however, Kramer, being afraid, refused to go. When his older brother asked why he turned the trip down, Larry admitted to the relationship. Arthur convinced

his parents and his younger brother that Larry should undergo psychoanalysis. Therapy became an ongoing process for Larry and had a profound impact on his future work as a writer and playwright. He eventually graduated from Yale in 1957 with a degree in English.

Kramer's professional career began in the mailroom of the William Morris Agency. He later transferred to Columbia Pictures where he became a screenwriter. His first script, *Here We Go 'Round the Mulberry Bush* (1968) was a British hit and led the way for his most famous screenplay, *Women In Love*, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award in 1970 (Long 237). The years that followed were filled with financial flops. It seemed that Kramer simply could not recreate the success of his previous scripts. With the help of his brother, Kramer invested his money and never had to work a nine to five job again.

### FINDING HIS THEATRICAL VOICE

In 1973, Larry Kramer's first play was produced. The show was entitled *Sissies' Scrapbook* and was part of the Playwrights Horizon season. Kramer's initial play describes the relationships between four male college friends; three of which are heterosexual and one who is homosexual. The show has an omniscient narrator who starts off the play by describing the destinies of each of the main characters. Then the audience begins to see these destinies become reality. John, one of the newly married friends, convinces himself that his new wife does not love him and becomes catatonic. He undergoes electro-shock therapy, which is eventually successful; in the end, however, he

does not survive. Barry is a sadist who seeks to understand himself and why he enjoys inflicting pain on others. Dick is a therapist who always believes to have the answer but cannot save his own marriage. Finally, Ron is a closeted homosexual who conceals his true nature from his closest friends. Ron moves from one trick to the next until he falls for a male model at the advertising agency he works for. The model is ready to commit to a relationship, but Ron self-destructively sabotages anything between them and ends up alone.

Kramer originally meant for *Sissies' Scrapbook* to be a screenplay. He discusses his decision to turn the story into a play in the introduction to his collection of works, *Women in Love and Other Dramatic Writings*:

I simply had not enjoyed making the film [*Women in Love*], and I found writing screenplays creatively unsatisfying. I thought for a while it was because I was not writing anything that meant anything to me- that is, that I had something invested in, like being gay. But adapting Yukio Mishima's *Forbidden Colors*, a novel very much about homosexuality, had only been a little bit better. And no studio wanted to finance it when I submitted it (115).

Kramer finished a draft of the screenplay only to find the same problem; no studio was willing to produce material directly related to a gay theme. Instead, he decided to try his hand at playwriting. Once finished, the script of *Sissies' Scrapbook* became a producer's nightmare. Kramer himself admits that the set was very intricate for a low budget production and required more actors than a producer was willing to pay (*Women in Love* 116-117). His New York agent eventually told him about a group called Playwrights

Horizon that produced workshops for upcoming playwrights. At the time, the theatre company was working out of a dance studio in the YWCA on New York's Eighth Avenue. All eight showcase performances of *Sissies' Scrapbook* sold out and Kramer later admitted that he was moved by the audience's reaction to his show: "I had actually written something that touched people enough to cry. That is a very heady experience for a writer (this writer, anyway), then and now. If this was theater, then I never wanted to make another movie again" (*Women in Love* 117). *Sissies' Scrapbook* was later picked up for an Off-Off-Broadway production at the Clark Center in 1974. The producer demanded a total re-working of the script, forcing Kramer to edit intensively. Kramer changed the name of this new version to *Four Friends*, and the theatre division of the Ford Foundation chose the show as the best new play of the year. It was subsequently produced Off-Broadway at the Theatre De Lys, which is now called the Lucille Lortel (Willinger 217). The play ended as a result of the review from the *New York Times* critic, Clive Barnes who supposedly arrived thirty minutes late and wrote, "With friends like these you don't need enemies" (qtd. in Merla 34). The producer closed the show the day after it opened.

The closing of his first play deeply affected Larry Kramer. In his essay "The Farce in Just Saying No" (published as the introduction to his play, *Just Say No*), Kramer discusses the failure of *Four Friends*. He admits, "I did not suffer my failure well. I had witnessed the slaughter of my child and it hurt too much" (xx). Kramer, fearing the failure of his Off-Broadway debut, turned to novels. His first (and only) novel, entitled *Faggots* was published in 1978 during the peak of the gay sexual revolution. This supposedly fictional portrayal of the gay sex scene in New York established Larry Kramer as a

controversial voice within society. His writing essentially called for gay men to stop moving from partner to partner and seek monogamous relationships. Kramer was surprised at the reception of *Faggots*, hoping it would simply be viewed as a satirical story of the life he and his friends were living. Instead, he found that he lost friends after its publication and was essentially pushed out of gay society in New York. In his book, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, Kramer explains, “On a visit to Fire Island Pines, the summer retreat for many from New York’s, and the world’s, gay population, and the setting of my novel’s concluding section, it was made pointedly clear to me that I was no longer welcome” (7). For the next three years, Kramer kept a low profile. It was the emergence of the AIDS disease that finally broke his silence. Kramer admits that those three years of solitude taught him “the necessary lesson for anyone who insists on speaking his mind: how to become a loner” (*Reports* 7), a trait that has stayed with him throughout his lifetime.

### **AN ACTIVIST IS BORN**

The summer of 1980 brought Larry Kramer out of his silence when he “witnessed a disturbing sight on Fire Island: a man carrying his delirious lover in his arms, asking people, ‘Does anyone know what’s wrong with Nick? I’ve been to doctors and hospitals and no one knows’” (Merla 36). Nick later died of a rare disease called cat scratch fever. Then a year later, Kramer read the first article about the AIDS disease, the *New York Times* article addressing the rare cancer seen only in homosexual men. He called Lawrence Mass, a friend of his who was a doctor (and the first reporter, medical or otherwise, to

write about the epidemic in any media). Dr. Mass recommended Larry speak with Dr. Friedman-Kien, the dermatologist quoted in the *Times* article.

At Dr. Friedman-Kien's office, Kramer encountered two friends who had been diagnosed with the rare cancer (these friends were dead within a year). The doctor explained that these cases were only the beginning and suggested that with Kramer's profile as the author of *Faggots*, he should warn the gay community about the possible danger of this new disease. On August 11, 1981, Friedman-Kien spoke to eighty men assembled in Kramer's apartment. This meeting raised \$6,635. Over Labor Day weekend the same year, Kramer and several dozen men attempted to raise more money at Fire Island. Even with over 15,000 visitors, the group was only able to raise \$769.55 (Merla 36-37). Filled with a sense of desperation, Kramer turned to writing.

The following week, Kramer wrote an article for the *New York Native* (a newspaper targeted to the gay and lesbian community). This article became the first of many articles and letters Kramer would write for the periodical. In 1982 Larry Kramer helped create the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), a non-profit organization invested in raising money and awareness for the AIDS disease. Kramer was not voted President of the organization, though in many cases he acted as such. Throughout the first year of its creation, Kramer would get into heated arguments with the board and various members of the GMHC. Board members would regularly quit after these debates and would then be replaced (Merla 39). By April of 1983 Kramer resigned under pressure from the organization. During his time with the GMHC and over the course of the next three years, he wrote articles for the *New York Native* including one of his most famous essays entitled, *1,112*

*and Counting*. This polemic piece began, “If this article doesn’t scare the shit out of you, we’re in real trouble. If this article doesn’t rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get” (*Reports* 33). Kramer and his writings were filled with anger as he blamed the local and national government, the medical profession, and the gay community for allowing the spread of the disease. It was through his experiences with the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the lack of media coverage of the AIDS disease, and the deaths of dozens of his friends that eventually prompted Kramer to write one of the most important plays dealing with the AIDS crisis.

#### **KRAMER’S *NORMAL HEART***

Without the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Kramer feared that his voice would once again be ignored. He began work on another novel, which he called *City of Death* in an attempt to arouse awareness about the epidemic, “but the form [novel] proved too removed, too distant for the message’s urgency” (Paller 245). Instead, Kramer began thinking about the novel in more dramatic terms, and a trip to London, where he saw a series of political plays, solidified his idea. He was especially moved by David Hare’s *A Map of the World* which convinced Kramer to turn his experiences into a piece of drama (Paller 245). During the same trip, Kramer visited Germany where he went to Dachau and found a focus for his material. He compared the treatment of gay men in the AIDS epidemic to the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust.

Kramer finished the first draft of *The Normal Heart* by the end of August 1983; however, it was not easy to find a producer for his play. Larry Kramer specifically wanted to find a mainstream theatre to house *The Normal Heart*. There were many opportunities for gay playwrights throughout the predominantly gay theatres in town, but Kramer knew that the only way for his message to reach a wide audience would be to produce the show at a reputable, mainstream theatre. He ultimately turned to Joseph Papp and his famous Public Theatre.

At first, the Public Theatre was not interested in producing a play about AIDS, especially a play that was so crudely written. The first draft of *The Normal Heart* was over four hours long and essentially included two plays in one. One part dealt with Kramer's relationship with his family and the other dealt with his experiences with the GMHC and the AIDS crisis. Gail Merrifield Papp, Joseph Papp's wife and head of the theatre's play department, was one of the first Public Theater personnel to read *The Normal Heart*. Though she did not like the script at first, she admits, "When I finished it, however, I was moved. Somehow it had taken me on a tumultuous, if confusing and awkward, journey, and I was interested in talking to the author" (Papp 259). Luckily, she did speak with Kramer.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Kramer met with Gail Papp and made revisions based on her suggestions. It was finally through her persuasion that Joseph Papp read the final draft. In Gail Merrifield Papp's essay, *Larry Kramer at the Public Theater*, she includes a quote from her husband based on his first experience reading the play: "This is one of the worst things I've ever read- and I [was] crying. I was crying! Could you

believe it? I was so moved, because there was so much feeling in the play. The heart of *The Normal Heart* was beating there” (Papp 261). Joseph Papp’s decided to produce the play which became one of his most important decisions as head of the Public Theatre.

*The Normal Heart* opened at New York City’s Public Theater on April 21, 1985. The play was a huge success and ended up being the longest running show in the Public Theater’s history. The play never mentions AIDS by name, but instead details the history of the disease from a medical, societal and personal standpoint as Kramer centers much of the action on the relationship between the main character, Ned Weeks, and his lover, Felix Turner. Felix, who is diagnosed with the disease, progressively grows more ill as the story unfolds. The play ends with an emotional deathbed marriage where Felix’s doctor, marries Ned and his lover, only for Felix to die moments later. Ned ends the play with a monologue where he asks, “Why didn’t I fight harder!” (122) and goes on to thank Felix for being in his life.

Even with this poignant love story, many critics were not able to separate Larry Kramer the playwright from Larry Kramer the activist. In fact, much of the play’s negative criticism came from the gay community. Kramer was accused of making himself out to be a hero, yet he himself writes, “I was trying, somehow and again, to atone for my own behavior” (*Reports* 93). Richard Goldstein, gay editor of the *Village Voice* in 1985, wrote a harsh article where he attacked Kramer on many points, calling him a “narcissist” and a “figure of scorn within the gay community” (Paller 246). This opened the door for many more gay critical responses.

By that time, there was another mainstream AIDS play running in New York. William Hoffman's *As Is* opened on Broadway just a couple of months before Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. Still, *The Normal Heart* received much more mainstream press than *As Is*. Goldstein decided the reason for this, "was that Hoffman insisted that gay men be taken *As Is*- without criticism. The straight press wasn't about to embrace that notion, especially when it had the self-hating *Normal Heart* to throw its arms around" (Paller 246). Yet, the fact of the matter is that *The Normal Heart* was a huge success and succeeded in Kramer's mission (with over 600 productions worldwide) to bring mainstream attention to the issue of AIDS. Frank Rich's original *New York Times* review of the show, though not as positive as others, explains: "Much to his credit, Mr. Kramer makes no attempt to sanitize AIDS; the scenes featuring the disease's suffering victims are harrowing" (C17). Kramer's unapologetic look at the disease, though sometimes borderline cliché, forces audiences to deal with its effects.

In his book, *Reports from the Holocaust: the Making of an AIDS Activist*, Kramer admits, "I rarely allow myself to feel good about having written something that might help change people's minds. I never think that happens. But it was nice to have a success" (92). And Kramer's work certainly did affect many who saw a production of his play. At the end of many performances, audience members, especially gay men would sit in the theatre once the curtain came down. David Drake was one of these audience members; he created a play called *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* which detailed his experience and call to action. The play had a successful Off-Off-Broadway run with several touring productions as well, and Drake later went on to become the editor-in-chief of *Poz*, a

magazine for people with AIDS, which is still published today. Kramer's AIDS play even began to impact the role of gay and lesbian characters in the theatre. "Under the influence of *The Normal Heart*, yet another image of gays and lesbians emerged in gay theater. Plays began depicting gay men and lesbians as caregivers when the body is no longer an object of desire" (Paller 249). Even such famed playwrights as Tony Kushner, who is world renowned for his work, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, describes the importance of *The Normal Heart*: it "galvanized its audience like no play any of us- any of my generation of theater artists, certainly- had ever seen; and which awoke in theater people a long-dormant ambition to make popular theater that enters full-bloodedly into civil life, into immediacy, crisis, and public debate" (192). Kramer set out to get his message across and seemingly met his goal, but he himself wanted to create more of a response from his audiences. Kramer wanted his audience to do something to help the AIDS cause. He said, "The play [*The Normal Heart*] doesn't seem to make people into fighters. I want them to go out there and throw bombs. It doesn't make people want to stop the wrong; it seems to make them want to *manage* the wrong" (qtd. in Paller 252). Kramer's own life of activism illustrates the response he was looking for from his audience.

### **BEYOND *THE NORMAL HEART***

After the success of the New York production of *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer still had more to say. In 1987, he helped establish the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an organization that still exists today, and during this time of activism, he

continued to work on new plays. His next theatrical venture was a farce entitled *Just Say No*, named for Nancy Reagan's anti-drug campaign with the same slogan. In this production, which opened on October 4, 1988 and ran through November 6, 1988 at the WPA Theatre in New York, Kramer takes even more of a political stance on the topic of AIDS. In this case, he uses the theater to accuse Ronald and Nancy Reagan as well as New York City Mayor Ed Koch of doing nothing to raise awareness for AIDS. Kramer even goes so far as to accuse Ronald Reagan Jr. and Ed Koch as being closeted homosexuals. The show did not receive good reviews. In fact, Michael Kuchwara opens his 1988 *New York Times Review* by stating: "Larry Kramer's *Just Say No* is a sledgehammer farce, battering everybody in sight, including the audience" (BC). Michael Paller, in his essay *Larry Kramer and Gay Theater* gives reason as to why the play was not well received: "*Just Say No* falters precisely because it contains too much information and polemic for a farce to bear" (253). Larry Kramer himself began to question his future as a playwright: "The experience of *Just Say No* has made me question whether or not I should be writing plays. I want to get the message to the biggest possible audience, and the theatre just isn't time-,energy- or money efficient. Especially if the *New York Times* doesn't want you to get the message out" (qtd. in Paller 253). Always seeking to find new means of activism, Kramer constantly attempts to discover new ways of getting the message out.

Shortly after *Just Say No*, Kramer was diagnosed with Hepatitis B and HIV. This created a new sense of urgency as he continued to raise awareness and money for AIDS through ACT UP. He began writing his fifth, and quite possibly final, contribution to American theater: *The Destiny of Me*. The show opened on October 20, 1992 at the Lucille

Lortel Theatre in New York and begins where *The Normal Heart* leaves off. The audience sees the character of Ned Weeks at a hospital where Dr. Anthony Della Vida, who is modeled after AIDS researcher, Anthony Fauci, is beginning a new drug treatment on him. The play flashes back and forth to Weeks' character as a young boy who is named Alexander (and who presumably is the person Ned would have become had he not undergone years of psychoanalysis). Over the course of the story, Ned and Alexander come to terms with each other. It very much acts as a personal history play as each member of Larry Kramer's immediate family are present within the play's plot. Yet at the same time, Kramer continues to talk about AIDS and the role gay men played, and continue to play, in its transmission.

*The Destiny of Me* won Larry Kramer his most positive reviews and "should guarantee Kramer's stature as one of the major American playwrights of our time" (Willinger 224). The play has been compared to Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Once again, just like with *The Normal Heart*, Kramer asked himself, "In what possible way could *The Destiny of Me* ever change the world?" (*Destiny 2*). In the introduction to the play, Larry Kramer admits part of the reason why he felt called to write *The Destiny of Me*:

I further complicated my task by determining to write a personal history: a journey to acceptance of one's own homosexuality. My generation has had special, if not unique, problems along this way. We were the generation psychoanalysts tried to change. This journey, from discovery through guilt to momentary joy and toward AIDS, has been my longest, most important journey...Indeed, my homosexuality,

as unsatisfying as much of it was for so long, has been the single most important defining characteristic of my life (3).

Though he only wrote six plays (one of which, *A Minor Dark Age*, was never produced), Larry Kramer has had a huge effect on American drama, especially within the realm of AIDS plays. His beginnings as a screenwriter set the stage for his work in the theatre, but it was truly the AIDS epidemic as his own call to activism that turned him into the playwright he would become.

In many respects, Larry Kramer is not known for his writing but instead for his activism. His many protests and interviews on national newscasts have turned him into one of the most controversial speakers for AIDS as well as for gay men. Tony Kushner explains, “Larry is more honored as an activist than as a writer-and I think that’s a terrible thing. How many gorgeous passages are there in *Faggots*? How many beautiful pages of prose? Who knows what Larry Kramer might have written had he not taken it upon himself to shape a whole movement in response to the epidemic?” (Vargas C01). This is a question Larry Kramer often ponders himself:

I wonder, though, had I not become an activist would I have written more? And would it have been work suitable enough to satisfy future keepers of the gay literary canon? In 1981 everyone around me was starting to get sick, and then dying, and I saw no option to fighting so that more of us, certainly including myself, might live. And if my ‘fellow’ writers chose to ignore the realities of a growing plague, then it should be me who thinks less of them and their ‘art,’ not the other way around” (*Women* 481).

Another question Kramer often asks himself is why he still lives when so many of his friends and loved ones have died. He concludes that he must have more to contribute: “I am the only writer left alive who has been on the front line of this plague since its beginning and it is my obligation to tell everything I know” (*Women* 482). Kramer is reportedly working on another project: a history of the United States as he sees it with a working title, *The American People*. The 3,000 pages of manuscript will be finished “when he finishes it” (Vargas C01). Regardless of whether or not Kramer publishes another dramatic or literary work in his lifetime, his legacy as an author, playwright, and activist will continue to be a voice for those who suffered, and continue to suffer, since the discovery AIDS. When it comes to AIDS, Larry Kramer took the vehicle of theatre and helped turn it into a forum where society was educated, warned, and forced to deal with the events surrounding this epidemic. Larry Kramer helped open the door for a new chapter in theatre history; his fearlessness truly made a difference in the world.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Night Sweat and The Normal Heart:*

#### **Pioneering Plays within the AIDS Theatre Canon**

As the early years of the AIDS epidemic began taking its toll throughout the gay community, two gay playwrights in particular hold the distinction of writing two of the earliest AIDS plays to be produced in the United States. These two plays, Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* both address the issue of AIDS in the gay community of the 1980s. Chesley and Kramer became pioneers in the AIDS theatre genre, paving the way for such works as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!* Both *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart* bring awareness to the disease, yet *The Normal Heart* became the longest running play at the Public Theatre and is still produced around the world, whereas *Night Sweat* is often ignored. *The Normal Heart*, though filled with political jabs, became one of the most well known AIDS play due to its depiction of gay men as conventional characters. This portrayal of gay men as responsible parties for the spread of the disease

also lends itself to a wider acceptance of the play. Chesley, though purposefully writing for gay audiences, shut himself off to a more mainstream following due to his depictions of sex onstage. By comparing the major themes throughout both of these theatrical works, we are able to analyze the reasons why audiences from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities were able to connect with *The Normal Heart* and unable to with *Nigh Sweat*.

### ***NIGHT SWEAT***

Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat* was first produced in 1984 at New York's Meridian Gay Theatre. The story centers on an underground Coup de Grace club where gay men who have been infected with HIV/AIDS go to have a chosen "experience." As the director of the club in one of the opening scenes explains, "The experience is the ultimate moment of life, a joyous celebration of the gift of self-awareness, self-realization" (19). The audience quickly learns the "experience" stands for the AIDS patient's chosen suicide. The Club, as it is often referred to, is in fact an assisted suicide club where gay men with AIDS choose everything from erotic asphyxiations, to S&M deaths at the hands of men in leather. The club itself is in an undisclosed underground location complete with a full disco and one of the finest restaurants in town.

After an opening death scene of erotic asphyxiation, we meet Richard who is checking himself into the club and attempting to choose his own experience. Richard does not want to face the next year as his symptoms worsen, and instead of reaching out to his friends for help, he has decided to take his own life. After paying his \$10,000, Richard is welcomed by the club director and taken on a tour of the premises. In the disco, he meets

Tom who is enjoying his last day before his own experience. The two decide to spend the night together, only to leave Richard falling in love with Tom. Tom explains that his experience will be political: he will be beat by queer bashers and left on the street with the word AIDS, cut onto his body. Richard expresses his newly formed feelings for Tom as the two discuss relationships and love. Richard mentions his ex-lover Allan and admits that he still loves him as well. As Tom leaves to prepare for his death, he chastises Richard for choosing to join the club. According to Tom, Richard still has hope; he should not be choosing to die.

As act two opens, several club workers discuss the mistake of allowing Tom to leave the club to complete his experience. Apparently, Tom and the men playing his queer oppressors did not return from the night before. Tom's body was not found and nothing was mentioned in the news, as it should have been. Richard, who has been attending the experiences of several different club members, watches yet another nameless victim die when suddenly his ex-lover Allan enters the scene. Allan has discovered Richard's plan and accordingly, come to his rescue. Of course the club security has been breached; the director then takes Allan into custody, explaining that club policy of only taking life willingly will be ignored in his case. The director will allow Allan to choose his death, but Allan must be killed in order to save the secrecy of the club.

In the meantime, Richard has chosen "terminal sex" as his experience and preparations are underway. The club director forces Allan to watch as Richard is slowly brought to climax by two men in leather on the disco floor. As one of these men brings a dagger above Richard's head, Tom enters the scene dressed as a nun. He explains that life

should be chosen, not death; and regardless of the fact that Richard is dying, he should still enjoy the life he has left. Tom saves Richard and Allan as another victim who is slated to die after Richard comes out onto the dance floor screaming, “I don’t want to die... I want to live” (68). The play ends with this character’s plea.

Throughout the piece there are various interludes of non-distinct characters’ deaths. The only specific character is Jephtha Williams, the owner of the Sepulchre, a gay bathhouse and disco. As the scene progresses, Williams admits he allowed the government to experiment with various disease warfare within his club, thus leading the audience to believe he and the government were major reasons behind the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Audiences in 1984 were not completely prepared for *Night Sweat*. The lewd scenes of sex as well as the overwhelming depictions of death in a community that had been dealing with major losses of life since 1981, added to the failure of Chesley’s play. According to David Román:

The combined effect of the play’s nonrealist form with the play’s graphic display of sadomasochism, suicide, and despair alienated audiences eager for the more positive and/or heartwrenching AIDS representations...In a city besieged by AIDS, a play about a suicide service for gay men with AIDS was bound to be dismissed (56).

Originally written by a gay man for gay men, Chesley very specifically wanted to create theatre that would celebrate the gay community. By writing a piece of theatre that acknowledges the role of sex within the gay lifestyle and making no apologies for it, Chesley produced a polar opposite to Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*.

### *THE NORMAL HEART*

Larry Kramer's polemic history play details events in his life from 1981 through 1984. First produced at The Public Theater in 1985, Kramer chronicles the making of the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and his ultimate rise and fall within the organization. The story's main sub-plot centers on the relationship between Ned (most obviously Kramer) and his lover Felix. Felix has been diagnosed with the disease and ends up in a hospital by the end of the play. On his deathbed, Felix and Ned commit their love to each other and are married by Felix's doctor only for Felix to die moments later.

Throughout the epic drama, Ned fights the Mayor of New York, as well as his friends and Felix to create more awareness and raise more money to fight the disease. Personal stories are entwined throughout the piece with blatant facts about the disease and attacks against the government. One moment the audience hears a heartbreaking monologue about a man who lost his lover to the disease only to have the hospital refuse to remove the body, and in the next two doctors discuss their need for funding in order to find a cure.

Kramer argues for gay men to live within mainstream society and goes to great lengths to portray characters that are "normal," working professionals. He even goes so far as to blame the gay community for allowing deaths from AIDS to happen. In a heated debate, Ned contests, "the gay leaders who created this sexual-liberation philosophy in the first place have been the death of us...why didn't you guys fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity" (85). Kramer establishes his

argument against the gay lifestyle of the time. By questioning the gay liberation movement and calling for a more heterosexual take on gay relationships, Kramer moves his play into a position where it can be embraced by mainstream society.

*The Normal Heart* ran for a year at New York's Public Theatre and was successfully produced around the world. Though Kramer essentially staged his life from 1981 to 1984, he still held the uncanny ability to speak to audiences of all sexual orientations. Kramer's piece brought mainstream attention to the subject of AIDS and will forever be remembered as a milestone for its time.

### **SEX AND SEXUALITY**

At a time when the American government was virtually ignoring gay men and their overwhelming loss of lives, the only recognition homosexuals received was blame for the spread of the disease. The Center for Disease Control was unable to determine the exact details as to how the disease spread; however, there was a base understanding that sexual contact was the main cause. After the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, gay society members were known for their sexual freedom. Both Chesley and Kramer attempted to respond to the issue of sex in their plays. In fact, the most extreme differences between *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart* are the playwrights' depictions of sex and sexuality. Chesley's play centers around a gay suicide club where each death (at least those seen by the audience) includes some element of sex. Kramer on the other hand was chastised by the gay press as blaming the gay community for the spread of the disease. In Kramer's play, the audience hears the characters discuss gay relationships and gay sex, but we do not

actually see the act onstage. Chesley, in an attempt to celebrate gay sex and the gay lifestyle, inundates his piece with images of men and sex. In the introduction of a collection of Chesley's plays entitled, *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*, Bert Herrman explains, "The fact remains that thousands of gay men have died and are still dying. But the passion of our celebration of life will not die. [Chesley] has become a symbol of our celebration" (7). The inclusion of sex onstage during Chesley's play truly creates a gay-positive argument through a continuation of the gay sexual liberation.

Chesley, who later wrote, *Jerker or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty* became known for his theatrical images of eroticism. Each of his plays celebrates the sexual male in response to and in response against AIDS. Chesley urges gay men to continue living and loving in the time of AIDS. As Tom enters the final scene of *Night Sweat*, he tells Richard, "Live until the very moment you die! And make love! Make love in every possible, safe and sensible way! Enjoy it all, from the most delicate cruising to the heaviest S and M trips! Oh yes! So long as you do it with your head and heart!" (66). This argument becomes one of Chesley's classic themes.

Kramer on the other hand urges gay men to marry and create monogamous relationships. During the scene where Ned and Felix go on their first date, Felix describes having sex with Ned at the "baths" years ago. Ned does not remember, so Felix describes, "we made love. We talked. We kissed. We cuddled. We made love again" (53). The use of the word "love" along with a description of the act versus a physical illustration of

it, signifies Kramer's lack of raw eroticism. This is very different from Chesley's stage directions in the closing scene of *Night Sweat*: "The first hunky man is fucking Richard from behind, while the second hunky man is kneeling in front of him, sucking him and reaching up to pinch his tits" (65). The choice of language clearly paints a very distinct difference between the two treatments of sex.

Many critics believe it is Kramer's argument that gay men should not live promiscuous lifestyles that becomes the reason why *The Normal Heart* survives and flourishes in mainstream society. Kramer, who was a screenwriter before becoming an activist and playwright, understood the need to reach as broad of an audience as possible. Chesley on the other hand admits to writing *Night Sweat* solely for a gay audience. In his notes on *Night Sweat*, he answers the question as to why he wrote the play:

My concerns, of mind and heart, had to do with the implications of what was happening for a community I love. I had been rescued from a life of sexual isolation, self-hatred and fear by that community of liberationists who first offered a positive social and personal identity for my sexual and affectional needs. I was celebrating gay sex, and finding it immensely and deeply rewarding. But now, very suddenly, the positive gay identity which had given me life became frightening. Sex- beautiful gay sex!- was implicated (10).

By presenting his material in a sex-positive light, Chesley went against societal opinion of the time. His play, written for gay men was not able to transcend gay theatres.

The AIDS disease revolves around the issue of sex. Since sexual contact is one of the main causes for the spread of HIV/AIDS, it is only natural that playwrights would

include the topic in plays dealing with AIDS. Sex also became a main theme within *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart*, though both plays deal with the issue in completely different ways. At a time when homosexuals were blamed for the spread of the disease, Larry Kramer presented material that supported this claim. As a gay man calling for the right to get married versus the right to have sex freely, Kramer gave mainstream society exactly what it wanted: another opportunity to hold gay men accountable for the disease. Kramer's lack of sexual images onstage, also created a piece of theatre that would be viewed by a wider audience. Ironically (or perhaps purposefully), Kramer also produced more press for *The Normal Heart* through public arguments between his opinions and the opinions of other gay leaders.

### **POLITICAL VS. PERSONAL**

Both *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart* have political and personal sides to their story. Larry Kramer in his polemic attack against New York City Mayor Ed Koch along with the United States Government at large, offers his political response very openly, whereas Chesley shrouds his political views within the characters and situations of the play.

Chesley's most obvious political viewpoint is found in the scene where Jephtha Williams admits to allowing the government to perform disease warfare tests within his gay bathhouse; yet the underlying political statement of Tom choosing to die at the hands of "fag bashers" creates yet another commentary on society's poor treatment of homosexuals at the time. Chesley attempts to show his audience the turbulent times he

himself lives in. In a scene where two club workers are burning bodies, the audience finds out Jason, the club director pays the authorities to keep his business open. The workers also explain that Tom did not return from his “experience” the night before. He should have been found the next morning and reported in the paper, but there is no report and no sign of Tom. One worker asserts, “I tell you, some guys will do anything for political advantage, that’s why you never can trust them... It’s a corrupt world we live in, that’s all I can say, when it comes to that” (49). The irony lies of course, in the fact that these men work for the same club that murders these people with AIDS.

Kramer’s political voice is seen and heard throughout the script of *The Normal Heart*. He overtly makes political jabs and stabs at almost every office he can possibly muster. Ned Weeks often compares the treatment of gay men to that of Jews during the holocaust. He explains Jews own the New York Times and Washington Post yet early coverage of the holocaust was not mentioned until page twenty-eight in each newsource. He explains that the same treatment occurred during the early years of the AIDS epidemic and many lives could have been saved if extensive coverage was included from the beginning. In a meeting with Hiram, Mayor Koch’s assistant, Ned asks, “how dare you choose who will live and who will die” (88). He later goes on to say (in regards to the mayor), “you tell that cocksucker that he’s a selfish, heartless, son of a bitch” (90). Kramer’s politics are never in question as his main character talks incessantly about the facts behind the AIDS disease and the government’s lack of education and funding to save lives.

Chesley's main piece of political undermining comes from the idea that gay men are doing this to themselves. Kramer outright admits that the homosexual community is not doing anything to stop the spread of the disease, yet Chesley in an abstract way produces the same argument. Jephtha Williams and Jason, the club director are both admitted gay men who are taking the money and in turn, the lives of their gay counterparts. In defense against being called a murderer by Allan, Jason exclaims, "do you really think that anyone cares if faggots kill themselves?" He later goes on to say, "this club is as much his [Richard's] creation as mine. Where would I be without him?" (52). Jason's frank admittance, solidifies Chesley's belief that gay men are not helping their own situation, yet he presents the material indirectly, a very different approach from *The Normal Heart*.

Larry Kramer argues gay men are a partial reason for the spread of the disease. Throughout the play, Ned Weeks describes a certain sense of apathy from gay men when it comes to curing the epidemic. Ned, in one of his many rants against the gay press, complains, "it's impossible to get this epidemic taken seriously. I wrote a letter to the gay newspaper and some guy wrote in, "Oh there goes Ned Weeks again; he wants us all to die so he can say 'I told you so'" (66). The play becomes Ned Weeks against everyone: his government, his friends, his lover and even his family as he desperately attempts to raise money and awareness about HIV/AIDS.

Both Chesley and Kramer include political and personal messages in their plays; however, Kramer writes from the point of view of a "truthful" account of real-life events. His story revolves out of his own life and the situations in which he found himself. Many

of the articles referenced in the play are actual articles Kramer wrote into *The Village Voice* and most of the stories are admittedly true yet thinly veiled behind the façade of a play. Mainstream audiences were much more ready to swallow a realistic portrayal of the AIDS crisis from the standpoint of a character who had already become a prominent figure within the gay community.

Chesley admits to writing what was on his heart and mind, and even goes so far as to say, “of course, a good deal of this material is personal. *Night Sweat* is a portrayal of my own fears and self-hatred. But the personal is political, particularly for a people that is still forming its identity” (10). Chesley strays from realism as we enter what can seemingly be described as a dream brought on by the fever and night sweats of AIDS. The audience is left wondering if the entire play is a fantasy or did in fact occur before our eyes. With Kramer, we question nothing. We are watching life depicted onstage. The ability to connect with a character is a very important element to the success of *The Normal Heart*. Though we may be annoyed by Ned Weeks’ ranting, we are still able to stand behind his beliefs. Chesley on the other hand does not create the same feeling toward Richard. Instead the audience is confronted with a man choosing to end his life. We do not experience his pain or even his AIDS symptoms, we simply watch idly by as a man chooses to seemingly unnecessarily end his life.

## FAMILY

Both plays incorporate the theme of family; yet do so in very opposite ways. In *Night Sweat*, Richard explains that his family does not know about his disease nor does he

want to tell them. He also chooses not to tell Allan (his best friend and ex-lover) as he does not want to put him through the pain of watching him die from the disease. This absence of natural family versus the inclusion of a chosen family is certainly a recurring theme throughout the gay experience. Chesley, as he explains in his introduction to the play, expresses his fears through the story. He feared being diagnosed with AIDS and dealing with the symptoms alone. His own fear of being alone represents the fears of so many gay men at this time. AIDS was completely misunderstood and not even being addressed by public officials or the news media. AIDS patients often lost their jobs and insurance once their diagnosis was discovered.

Unlike *Night Sweat*, family plays a very dissimilar role in *The Normal Heart*. Ned, again just like Larry Kramer, is constantly seeking his brother's approval. In several scenes depicting the relationship between Ned and his brother Ben, the two discuss the gay lifestyle. Kramer uses Ned's respect for his brother as a means of once again proclaiming gay men as a responsible party for the epidemic. In an early scene, Ned admits to Ben, "you're the only person in the world I can't get mad at and stay mad at. I think my world would come to an end without you" (46). Later, Ben and Ned share the following exchange:

Ben: But then you tell me how you go to the bathhouses and fuck blindly, and to me that's not so different from this. You guys don't seem to understand why there are rules, and regulations guidelines, responsibilities. You guys have a dreadful image problem.

Ned: I know that! That's what has to be changed. That's why it's so important to have people like you supporting us. You're a respected person. You already have your dignity.

Ned obviously admires his brother and wants to be like him in many respects. Kramer paints Ben's character as the older, supportive sibling who looks out for Ned. Though he mostly helps Ned from a business standpoint (Ben is a lawyer), there is an emotional level to which Ben cares for Ned as well. The discussions these two hold along with Ned's agreement that his brother is right in believing gay men need to change their lifestyle and image, create one of the strongest undertones of Kramer's argument.

Kramer attempts to illustrate the importance of family and of gays and lesbians not giving up on holding a place at society's table; whereas Chesley asserts gay men are alone and can only depend on each other. In a certain sense, both playwrights stand behind the idea that gay men must help each other educate, fund, and emotionally support those dealing with AIDS, yet each playwright writes the message through extremely different means. Kramer's words, which are constantly fueled by blame, never sees his self-proclaimed battle to find a cure for the disease won. Chesley's ending marks a very distinct realization that Richard cannot and will not take this journey alone. In a scene where Allan and Richard discuss the death of one of their best friends from AIDS (Michael), Richard exclaims that he does not want to put his friends through the same sadness with his death. Allan asserts, "Michael wasn't 'doing anything to his friends.' He was allowing them to love him" (46). As the play comes to an end, the audience watches as Richard and Allan are saved from death at the hands of the club and given the chance to

live their lives to the fullest. Richard, though still afraid to die, learns the importance of his relationship with Allan. In *The Normal Heart*, Ned and Ben never quite create that perfect relationship. Ben, unable to talk his firm into supporting Ned and the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) lets his brother down. The stereotypical family relationship that is so important to Kramer becomes fruitless, yet Chesley foreshadows the support from loved ones as his characters deal with dying from the disease.

### **DEATH AND DYING**

Another important difference between *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart* (and one of the main reasons *Nigh Sweat* was not as well received) revolves around each playwright's depiction of death and dying. In the early years of AIDS, gay men who were diagnosed with the disease were dying very quickly and at alarming rates. The numbers grew exponentially without any trace of a cure. Audience members (and especially gay men) needed a way to deal with the disease.

Chesley's suicide club certainly handles the idea of dying from AIDS, yet does so in an extremist sort of way. In our culture, we are told to rail against death and in many religious teachings, the idea of suicide is considered a moral and mortal sin. Richard's choosing to go to the club for assisted suicide when he does not have any of the disease symptoms, paints a very different picture from Kramer's character of Ned Weeks who is fighting for a cure. Though Chesley ends his play in what could be seen as a positive view on death and dying (certainly a desire to fight it); the fact remains his entire piece revolves around the idea of taking one's life. Richard, who fears the disease and the symptoms he

will soon face explains, "I've seen it. A friend of mine- Michael- couple of months ago- I- just can't face the- the next year? Year-and-a-half" (17). Once again we overhear the agony of Michael's death yet we do not see the symptoms first hand. Richard believes that the only way to deal with being HIV positive is to end life in his prime, and of course the club director who runs a business out of death, accepts this opinion. In fact the director, attempts to alter Allan's opinion of the club by saying, "Free yourself from rigid definitions, Allan! At the very worst, what we offer can be called mercy killing, though, of course, we offer so much more than mercy" (51). Throughout the play, Chesley does paint his death scenes as merciful. The victim is often in a state of complete erotic joy, yet the play ends with a victim crying out for mercy and realizing that he does not want to die. It is only in the end that the audience understands the deep-rooted message, to live life to its fullest in spite of AIDS.

Kramer on the other hand, never once strays from his message of fighting to live. Ned Weeks rants throughout the play as he calls for more governmental assistance to help fight the disease. As he discovers his lover Felix is infected, he immediately begins to seek the proper treatment. In the most emotional scene of *The Normal Heart*, Felix, who has been unable to walk across the room, urges Ned to stop forcing him to take treatments in an attempt to make him well. In a heated response Felix, cries out, "Eighty-five percent of us are dead after two years...it gets higher after three." To that Ned exclaims, "you want to die Felix? Die!" Ned throws food out of the refrigerator, dropping a carton of milk that explodes onto the floor. After a moment, Felix who has been lying on the floor, crawls through the milk to Ned where the two embrace. Ned cries, "Felix, please don't

leave me” (117-118). The imagery of the milk as a representation of the loss of life is overwhelming, yet Kramer’s emotional and heart-felt moment is only followed after an argument. Ned never backs down, although he faces the adversity of his city, his doctor and even his family and friends. Kramer’s message remains unmistakable: fight against death; do not accept it. The final scene where Felix does die, Ned exclaims, “why didn’t I fight harder!” (122). This exclamation at the bitter end illustrates the desire to continue the war against the disease.

Kramer’s rouse to action instills a certain sense of hope throughout the play. Audience members are given the chance to follow Ned’s cause on a political and personal level, thus creating a connection with the character. Chesley’s characters seem devoid of hope until the very end. We spend the majority of the play watching men choose death and even at the end, we are left with a character who may or may not end up living. Both plays leave us hanging... no cure has been found, the characters have died or will inevitably die, but both urge the audience to live. Chesley writes from the standpoint of accepting the disease while continuing to live, whereas Kramer argues for us to fight against it. Both plays deal with death as many of the earlier AIDS play did. *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart* both include characters dying from the disease. The message becomes, *if we don’t fight this, we will die*. Effective medications had not been discovered at the time nor did it seem like doctors were attempting to discover a cure.

Audiences in the early 1980s needed a venue to understand and mourn the changes in their lives. The deaths of friends and loved ones became an everyday occurrence throughout the gay community and both Larry Kramer and Robert Chesley attempted to

help their audiences deal with this fact. *Night Sweat* and *The Normal Heart*, although very different, both served as means to bring attention to the AIDS disease. In many respects, it is Kramer's appeal to a heterosexual society that was the reason his play became as popular as it did. Through Kramer's G-rated portrayal of gay men and their relationships, as well as a lack of graphic sexual images, combined with his main character attempting to make the gay community take responsibility for the spread of the disease, Kramer created a play that could be appreciated by all parts of society. Chesley specifically wrote his play for a gay audience and catered to it with explicit gay and S&M sex.

The theatricality of these two plays remains another reason why *The Normal Heart* became as popular as it did. Chesley's play with its graphic stage directions becomes almost impossible to produce. Between the sexual images and the necessities of a set allowing actors to hang and burn in ovens, the difficulty of mounting a production of *Night Sweat* becomes costly as well; however, venues with a very specific client profile are the only theatres able to even attempt to produce such a play. Kramer's drama, with its simplistic set requirements and more mainstream subject matter, lends itself to a more diverse theatre crowd.

Both playwrights created pieces of theatre that illustrated their own ideas of the gay lifestyle in the early years of AIDS. The differences between sex and sexuality along with representations of death and dying serve as the most important distinctions between these two plays. Chesley's *Night Sweat* is often overlooked as the first produced AIDS play. It is forever overshadowed by the success of *The Normal Heart*. Chesley's play, though

completely valid, simply did not depict the disease in a light that could be appreciated by both the homosexual and heterosexual communities.

Kramer's absence of graphic sex onstage along with his argument of gay men serving as a part of the spread of the disease, created a piece of theatre that was understood by all. Though *The Normal Heart* was surrounded by controversy and not completely enjoyed by the gay community, it held the ability to cross out of queer theatres and into a mainstream playhouse in New York and subsequently the world. *The Normal Heart* brought worldwide attention to the subject of AIDS and will be remembered for its frank history of the first five years of the epidemic.

Regardless of box office success or scholarly review, both playwrights were extremely courageous to write about a subject that many in society were trying to ignore. It is men like Robert Chesley and Larry Kramer who forced the issue of AIDS to be discussed amongst the homosexual and heterosexual communities. Their courage marked the first in a creation of an AIDS theatre canon that will forever remain a part of our theatre history.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The Future of AIDS Theatre**

The AIDS theatre canon came out of death. Artists took a fatal disease and created a literature that will forever stand as testimony for life during the time of AIDS. The many playwrights of the 1980s used theatre as a means of dealing with the confusion and the blame the government and media set upon gay society. Writers such as Robert Chesley and Larry Kramer produced works of art that laid the foundation for the entire AIDS theatre genre. The talents of these men, along with countless other performing artists who used theatre as means of raising awareness for the disease, will forever be remembered as pioneers in the struggle for AIDS education in the 1980s.

As new information about the disease became available, playwrights made it their duty to present up-to-date facts about AIDS. The theatre's historical function as a political and social voice is certainly illustrated throughout the AIDS theatre canon. Most importantly, theatrical works began reflecting new drug treatments that became available. As real people living with AIDS began to live longer, so too did theatrical characters with the disease. As the threat of death from AIDS slowly began to wane, playwrights used

theatre as a way of dealing with a disease that many have called “the guest that simply won’t leave.”

After a quarter of a century, it seems that AIDS is simply not going away, yet the theatre has given us a means of understanding the history of the disease (with early works from the first generation AIDS plays) as well as a way of laughing and accepting the disease (with theatrical works from the second-generation of AIDS plays). Today’s AIDS theatre themes have begun to reflect issues such as AIDS in Africa and AIDS within the Latino and African-American communities. With such famous works as Jonathan Larson’s *RENT*, the theatre’s purpose to educate society about the effects of AIDS continues to thrive.

It is my hope that we will one day see a third generation of AIDS drama with plays reflecting the discovery of a cure. It would be truly amazing to read about the first patient to receive an AIDS vaccine. Our society can only have faith that we will one day experience that joy. Until then, the AIDS theatre canon will forever serve as society’s mirror, showing us our mistakes as well as our triumphs. From works of theatre that sprang out of death, we have received an art form that is alive and well today.

As an undergraduate at Virginia Commonwealth University, I had no idea my simple research paper would turn into a passion that has resulted in this thesis. I have discovered a new respect for the theatre and especially the artists who spoke out against a government and a society that refused to acknowledge those in the margins. I hope that this work will help continue the important study of AIDS theatre. My interest is only

piqued as I draw this project to a close, and I plan to continue my research and my own understanding of this important topic.

As we enter the 28<sup>th</sup> year of this epidemic, I feel that it is significant to note that many of those who lived in the middle of this plague are still alive. We must not lose out on the valuable stories and living research in these first-hand observers of history. In the grand scheme of theatre study, the AIDS drama genre is still quite young. Now is the time to solidify the continued study of this important era. I hope that *Responding to the Plague Years: AIDS Theatre in the 1980s* has done just that.

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## **APPENDIX A**

The following is an account of teaching my class, AIDS and Theatre.

The Theatre Pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) offers students the chance to create and teach a theatre course of their own. M.F.A. candidates are encouraged to teach these classes as part of their thesis projects, or to simply gain experience working as a college professor. From my first semester at VCU, I knew that I wanted to create a class on contemporary American Theatre and its response to the AIDS epidemic. The passion that I have found for researching this topic influenced my choice to create my class, and I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to see my goal achieved.

In the Spring of 2008, I began this process by submitting a course proposal to the theatre faculty members at VCU. I described my objectives as well as the reasons why I felt this course would be beneficial to theatre students. Finally, I gave a brief overview of how the class would be taught as well as a description of some of the activities I planned to include. This early in the process, I was not completely sure how I wanted to set up the class format. I knew I wanted the course to survey various plays from as many perspectives as possible, and I knew I wanted the daily activities to be discussion based. I had not chosen the specific plays at this point, so I attempted to articulate my overall objectives without sounding too vague.

Within a few weeks, I heard the good news that the class was approved by the faculty and slated for the Fall 2008 semester. The next step in this exciting process was choosing a time and space for the course. This was perhaps the most difficult step as I attempted to find a time that would not conflict with the theatre department's core classes. After careful deliberation, I realized this goal was impossible. I finally sat down with the department's scheduling assistant and chose Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00 p.m. to

3:15 p.m. I also made the choice to hold the class in one of the theatre department's studios. This gave me the option of having students act out portions of the scripts we would read as well as have the space to work on group projects if need be. I made sure to choose a studio with a projector and DVD player, as I knew I wanted to bring in elements of technology as we discussed the various pieces.

I spent the summer creating a syllabus and choosing plays to read in the class. I attempted to fulfill my goal by creating a survey that would include plays within a chronological sequence as well as represent the broad topics of gay men and AIDS, women and AIDS, Latinos and AIDS, AIDS in Africa, and solo performance pieces and AIDS. I found the most difficult task to be choosing plays from such a wide range of choices. I wanted my students to have as much exposure to the plethora of AIDS plays in existence while still giving time to discuss and analyze each piece. I knew I wanted this class to be discussion-based yet I also feared that I would have a quiet class or a class of one student or my biggest fear, no students at all. As I read countless plays over that summer, I finally narrowed it down to ten plays and supplemented some material by showing a movie based on a play. I created a coursepack for my students and on the first page, included a list of major pieces of dramatic literature based on the AIDS epidemic. This list calmed my mind when it came to representing the AIDS theatre genre. I felt that even if my students were not going to read every AIDS play in my class, at least they would have the option of reading some on their own.

I chose five plays for students to write a reading response to and then created an end of the semester group project where each student would choose a person who died or is

living with HIV/AIDS and is a part of the arts community. I decided to open this project up to the entire range of the arts, as I truly wanted students to find someone they could connect with and pay tribute through a presentation of the person's life. Members of the class would write a paper as well as discuss their chosen person in class. I stressed the use of visual aids, as I wanted the class to experience the artist's art in some form. I was most excited about this project, for I was interested in the artists my class would choose and the new knowledge I would gain through their presentations and papers.

By the first day of class, I had eleven students signed up. Ten of my students were undergraduates and one was an M.F.A. candidate. Each of these students was a theatre major and most were at the junior level. All had some type of interest in AIDS, whether it was from a social, political or personal standpoint. On the first day of class, I began by explaining that the content of the course would be explicit in some areas. I made the point that this disease was discovered through sexual contact and most of the plays in the AIDS theatre canon deals with sex and sexuality in some way. I asked my students to create a safe environment for themselves and their classmates by remaining respectful of each other's opinions and beliefs. I reminded them that we all come from different backgrounds and that it would be very important to keep this in mind as we began to discuss the disease and its effects on all of our lives.

On that first day of class, I asked my students to describe their earliest memory of hearing the word "AIDS." I started the conversation by describing an experience I had in the fifth grade where my class went on a field trip to a theatre and my best friend (who had recently moved from upstate New York) warned me to check for pins on my seat before I

sat down. He explained how AIDS patients were infecting needles and then hiding them on seats so that they could spread the disease. I remember being afraid for months afterward to sit in public seating.

With my story told, each student began to describe his or her first memory of dealing with the AIDS disease. Some discussed feeling the sadness of Ryan White having issues going to public school and others brought up Magic Johnson admitting on National television that he had contracted HIV. One of my students described the death of her aunt from the disease and the horror she felt as she watched her loved one's body dwindle away. As this first classroom conversation came to a close, I reiterated the point that each of us has been affected by HIV/AIDS in some way. This deadly disease has hit our generation and it has altered the way in which we now live our daily lives. I explained that the purpose of the class was to honor those who died and who are living with HIV/AIDS but to also pay tribute to those who had the courage to create public awareness through the world of the theatre.

As I ended this lesson, I spoke about the first New York Times article and had even included a copy of it in their coursepack. I gave a brief history of the ways in which the disease spread so quickly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I also showed a clip from a documentary entitled, *Gay Sex in the 70s* where a man discusses going to a group sex party and leaving without having sex only to find out that everyone who participated was dead three months later. I hoped that this created a strong impact on each student that the people we would be reading about were real and this disease affected individual lives.

The next two classes, we watched the film *And the Band Played On* because I feel like it gives a concise history of the first six years of the epidemic. I wanted my students to be on the same page as far as their understanding of where the disease started and the social and political ramifications of the early 1980s. By giving students a unified understanding, we all would be able to reference the film at later points in the course. Most of my students did make reference to aspects of the film throughout the semester and all expressed enjoyment after watching the movie.

The first play we read was Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts*. This play was the first produced AIDS play in New York and was extremely controversial. It holds the honor of being considered the first AIDS play and obviously important to the field as I have discussed in previous chapters. The frank sexual content of the play concerned me slightly; however, I decided it would be best to challenge my students with one of the most extreme plays we would read first. The discussion that followed the reading was excellent. My class jumped right into conversation and was not afraid to talk about issues that are often considered taboo in our culture. I appreciated their honesty and was thrilled at their desire to be involved in class discussion. I breathed a sigh of relief as I realized this class would take this journey with me. I no longer had to worry about a class that would not participate and with the class size being so small; it truly created a more open environment.

The rest of the class followed suit. We continually read plays and discussed them. I found that the older plays such as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* were very popular whereas the most recent play we read, *In The Continuum* was not popular at all. As the

semester progressed and we moved out of the realm of homosexuality and AIDS, I began to feel challenged to keep discussions rolling. I have mostly studied plays that deal with gay men and AIDS, yet I wanted to include more than simply queer theatre pieces on the subject of the disease. Including these other pieces, forced me to study and research even more. I gained new understandings of the disease and its effects on various cultures as we read these plays and discussed them.

Around the middle of the semester, I realized that I might have bit off more than I could chew as far as coursework went. The class was unable to have an in-depth discussion because I generally left only one class period to talk about a specific piece. I chose to make some alterations to the class and created a revised course schedule. I also chose to read the article David's Rabe used as his inspiration for *A Question of Mercy*. This true account of a doctor who was asked to help an AIDS patient commit suicide, created quite a stir in my classroom. Students not only looked at the issue of living with and dying from HIV/AIDS but also the rights of patients to choose to end their own suffering. A heated discussion ensued between members of the class as students began to take sides on the issue. I was quite happy that I had created such a response from my students and thrilled that I had found a true account for them to read. The personal touch once again helped meet my objective of putting a face with HIV/AIDS.

There are three class periods that stand out in my mind as being the most important and influential for the entire semester. I had the good fortune of having three guest speakers attend three different classes. The first was Dr. Noreen Barnes discussing Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; the second was an HIV-positive friend of mine by the name

of Steve Moore, and finally Joe, another HIV-positive friend of mine. These three guest speakers created the strongest impact on me and I believe my class as a whole.

I asked Dr. Barnes to speak about her experience living and working in San Francisco in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She spoke on a Thursday after the class had watched some scenes from the HBO mini-series of *Angels in America*. Dr. Barnes was completely relaxed as she told stories of working with the Eureka Theatre where Tony Kushner had been commissioned to write the play. She knows Kushner personally and reminiscently spoke about the opening night of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*. Tears filled her eyes as she described the audience's reaction to the final scene. She eloquently explained that every person in the theatre knew they were a part of theatre history and the experience was something she would never forget. She went on to express remorse for not keeping the many revisions of the script she was sent to read. In that moment I realized how truly blessed I was to have this person of living theatre history as a mentor. My class sat in awed silence as they listened to her story. Later, many students spoke to me about how moved they were by Dr. Barnes' experience. I reiterated the point that this disease created literature that is young. Many people who were at the forefront of the AIDS crisis are still alive today and this is a significant fact illustrated by Dr. Barnes and her personal experiences with the disease.

Steve Moore is an actor and comic who found out he was HIV-positive in the 1990s. He took his diagnosis and created a comedy routine that he still performs today. His credits include an HBO special, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, as well as a spot on *Entertainment Tonight*. Steve currently lives in Richmond, Virginia and works at various

theatres around town. I had the good fortune of working with Steve on a production of *Mame* in 2006. I asked him to speak at my class and he graciously agreed. Steve speaks at many different events around the country; however, he happily decided to share in this small studio for my eleven students. He spoke about his life as a comic and an actor, as well as his experience of finding out about his HIV status. Steve is currently in his 50s and has been living with the disease for over 20 years. He has the amazing ability to weave humor into the story of his life as he talks about the numerous side effects of the medications he is on and the his T-cell count that he has monitored monthly. Steve's status has moved back and forth from full-blown AIDS to HIV over the last 20 years, yet he continues to keep a smile on his face. I had several students express how that was their favorite class period, and I know everyone was touched in some way by Steve's humor and honesty.

Towards the end of the semester, my friend Joe came and spoke to my AIDS and Theatre class. He is my age and found out two years ago that he is HIV-positive. This was the first time he has spoken to a group of people about his disease. Unlike Steve, Joe is not open about his status and fears some repercussions should many people find out he is positive. When I asked him to speak at the class, I honestly thought he would say no. When he agreed, I have to admit I was a little worried. I was not sure how he would handle being asked personal questions about the topic. All of my fears were in vain.

Joe handled himself very well. He did not prepare a speech; he simply introduced himself, told a little about his background and took questions. I was extremely impressed by his honesty and openness. Later, I spoke to him about how he felt. The experience was

great for him and my students. Even though he did not approach the subject from a theatrical standpoint, it was still very meaningful for someone so close to my students' ages to openly talk about contracting HIV. Once again, I had several students express how moved they were by having a guest speaker, and I have come to believe that these class periods alone truly helped achieve my ultimate objective of looking at the disease and how it affects individuals.

I finished out the class with the final projects on an artist's biography and his or her struggle with AIDS. My students picked various artists that represented the areas of music, theatre, literature, dance and visual arts. I was extremely pleased with the outcome of this assignment. Each student seemed to take pride in his or her presentation and paper plus I believe everyone learned something new about each artist and his or her struggle with HIV/AIDS. I purposefully tried to leave the assignment open-ended so that each student could make it his or her own. Every member of the class brought in some type of visual aid, whether it was clips from youtube, movies or documentaries. Almost every student used technology in some way, making it easier to teach about the lives of these courageous artists. I was very pleased with the outcome and I believe that everyone enjoyed the two class periods where we shared this assignment.

As the final class came to an end, I began to think of all the plays I did not include and the activities I could have done. In many respects I believe I repeated many of the same activities. The set-up of the class was very static to a certain extent, but I also believe that I involved every single student in some way. Through their reading responses and our class discussions, each student's voice was heard. Many admitted they gained a new

awareness of the numerous AIDS plays as well as new understandings of the disease and its social implications. I realized that I accomplished what I ultimately set out to do in surveying the wide range of AIDS plays within this new canon. I have discovered that I could teach an entire semester on AIDS in Africa or plays dealing with women and AIDS just to name two ideas, but my goal was to provide a taste of each of these topics in hopes of sparking a new interest and respect in my students: that is a goal I feel confident I accomplished.

As my time at VCU comes to an end, I am grateful for this opportunity to create and teach my AIDS and theatre class. It has been an amazing opportunity to foster an idea from its conception through its completion. I have personally learned so many valuable lessons through this entire experience. I feel more confident in my abilities as a teacher, and I also have gained a new understanding in what it takes to creatively engage students in learning at the undergraduate level. My abilities to think on my feet and ask thought-provoking questions have certainly been enhanced, yet I have also begun to learn the fine-line of letting go of my objectives and allowing the class to take me on its own journey. There were discussions that fizzled out because I know I was not asking questions that needed a strong reaction, and there were conversations that simply would not end due to the overwhelming response of the class as a whole. This experiment was often scary, sometimes frustrating but always fulfilling as each Tuesday and Thursday rolled around. I will forever be grateful for this amazing opportunity and look forward to continually tweaking and working on this course for the future. I hope to have the privilege of teaching AIDS and Theatre again; it is an experience I will never forget.

## **APPENDIX B**

The following is the original syllabus given to students on the first day of AIDS and Theatre. An updated course schedule was given to students later in the semester; however, all assignments remained the same.

## **THEA 491/697: Theatre's Response to the AIDS Epidemic**

Instructor: Jason Campbell

Fall 2008

Location: PRFMA B072

Time: 2-3:15 p.m. Tuesdays/ Thursdays

Teaching Assistant: Jennifer Catton (cattonjn@vcu.edu)

Office: PRFMA 249

Office Hours: By Appointment

Email: campbelljv@vcu.edu

Phone: 828-1928

### **Course Description:**

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first discovered in the early 1980s. Originally considered to be a gay man's disease, AIDS eventually spread to all walks of life, regardless of sexuality, gender, race or geographic location.

Mainstream media did not adequately address information about the disease until 1985 with news of Rock Hudson's death from AIDS. The theatre community took it upon itself to educate society about the disease as well as help those infected and their families deal with living "positive." These plays and performances became known as "AIDS Plays" and they have illustrated every aspect of the disease from its early years through today.

This class will survey AIDS drama from the early 1980s through today. Attention will be paid to major themes including sexuality, women and AIDS, AIDS in Africa, AIDS in Latin America, along with theatrical groups and solo performers who have made significant contributions to the AIDS theatre body of work.

\*Note: Many AIDS plays center around the themes of sex and sexuality. There may be adult content in course material. If you are easily offended by frank discussions of sex and sexuality, you may want to reconsider enrolling in this course.

### **Required Texts:**

Coursepack from Uptown Color

*Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Tony Kushner

*In The Continuum*, Danai Gurira & Nikkole Salter

### **Grading:**

Attendance and Class Participation	25%
Reading Responses	25%
Final Written Paper	30%
Final In-Class Presentations	20%

**Reading Responses:**

Five reading responses are assigned over the course of the semester. Reading responses should be a reflection of your thoughts on the reading. Each response should be typed and a minimum of one page for undergraduates and two pages for graduate students.

**Final Project:**

For the final project, students are required to choose a performing artist who either died from or is living with AIDS. Each student will hand in a written paper on his or her artist as well as complete an in-class presentation on the chosen artist's life. The written portion should be a minimum of five typed pages (eight for graduate students), double-spaced and in MLA format. Students will be given a maximum of fifteen minutes for their presentations. Supporting materials such as audio-visuals, handouts or other visual aids are highly encouraged. More information about these projects will be given as the semester progresses.

**Late or missed assignments:**

A grade of zero will be given for late or missed assignments.

**Attendance:**

Each student is allowed two (2) absences. Any absence beyond that number will result in the loss of one full letter grade on your final grade for each additional absence. More than four (4) unexcused absences will result in a grade of "F" for the course.

**Tardy:**

Two cases of tardiness equal one absence.

**Excused Absences:**

Illness may be excused, but a doctor's note is required on the day you return to class. The professor is the final and sole judge as to whether or not an absence is to be "excused."

Production related assignments (matinee performances) as well pre-approved theatrical convention attendances will be excused, however you are responsible for letting the professor know you will be absent

**Class Conduct:**

All students enrolled in this class are entitled to a learning environment that is free from interference by other students, as stated by the VCU instructional program.

The instructor reserves the right to remove a student from class due to any type of disruptive behavior. Disruptive behavior on the part of a student may result in the filing of formal charges under the University's Rules. The underlying rule in this class is to show respect for your professor and fellow students. A second disruption and removal from the class will result in the student receiving a failing grade for the course.

All **cell phones** must be turned off prior to class. Students are not allowed to use wireless electronic devices in the classroom. The professor will keep his cell phone turned on in the event of a campus-wide emergency.

**Plagiarism and Cheating:**

This course adheres to the VCU honor system and therefore includes zero tolerance for plagiarism. For further information on the VCU honor system, please refer to the VCU resource guide.

**Students with disabilities:**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires VCU to provide academic adjustments or accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students seeking academic adjustments must self identify with the coordinator of services for students with disabilities on the appropriate campus; after meeting with the coordinator, students are encouraged to meet with the class instructor to discuss their needs. Please note that students with disabilities must also promptly provide their instructor with an official memorandum from the coordinator detailing any needed academic adjustments or accommodations. Accommodations cannot be provided in the absence of the memorandum.

**Weather Concerns:**

To determine the operating plan in effect during times of threatening weather or other emergency conditions listen for announcements on the major radio and television stations.

Call: 828-6736

Go to the VCU inclement weather site at <http://vcu.edu/weather/>

## Course Schedule (Updated 8/18/2008)

### August

- TH 21 Course Introduction; your understanding of AIDS;  
a brief history of gay sex in the 70s  
**Read *Prologue* from *The Epidemic***
- T 26 Watch *And The Band Played On*
- TH 28 Finish watching *And The Band Played On* and discuss  
**Read Feingold's *Introduction* and Chesley's *Night Sweats* for Tuesday; Reading Response due Tuesday**

### September

- T 2 AIDS and theatre in the early years (1981-1984);  
discuss *Night Sweats*
- TH 4 Chesley's *The Jerker*- celebrating sex while dealing with AIDS  
**Read Hoffman's *As Is* for Tuesday**
- T 9 The beginning of AIDS on Broadway: Hoffman's *As Is*  
**Read Kramer's *The Normal Heart* for Thursday**
- TH 11 No Class
- T 16 Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Mainstream Attention  
**Read "*As Is* and *The Normal Heart: Commercial Viability and Arrival in 1985*" for Tuesday; reading response comparing *As Is* to *The Normal Heart* due Thursday**
- TH 18 *As Is* vs. *The Normal Heart*  
**Read *Beirut* for Tuesday; reading response due Tuesday**
- T 23 Alan Bowne's *Beirut*  
**Read *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* for Thursday or article on *Angels*- TBD**

- TH 25 Tony Kushner's *Angels In America* – Guest Speaker
- T 30 Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and a new form of AIDS drama

## October

- TH 2 Guest Speaker  
**Read article by Dr. Noreen Barnes – “*Death and Desire*” for Tuesday**
- T 7 Second Generation AIDS Plays; begin watching *Jeffrey*
- TH 9 Finish watching *Jeffrey* and discuss  
**Read *Uncle Bob for Tuesday*; Reading Response due Tuesday**
- T 14 New ways of looking at AIDS: Pendleton's *Uncle Bob* and Rabe's *A Question of Mercy*  
**Bring two choices of final project topics for Tuesday 10/21**
- TH 16 Reading Day: No Class
- T 21 Choose Final Project Topics  
**Read *Patient A* for Thursday**
- TH 23 Discuss *Patient A*  
**Read Harrington's article, *American Theater, Women and the Pandemic* and Harrington's *Love & Danger* for Tuesday**
- T 28 Women and AIDS: discuss *Love & Danger*
- TH 30 AIDS and Latinos  
**Read *In The Continuum* for Tuesday and “*So Far Yet So Close*” in coursepack; Reading Response due Tuesday**

## November

T	4	AIDS in Africa: <i>In The Continuum</i> <b>Read "Solo Performance and AIDS" for Thursday</b>
TH	6	Discuss Article; Watch part of <i>The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me</i> <b>Read Miller's <i>My Queer Body</i> for Tuesday</b>
T	11	Discuss Miller's <i>My Queer Body</i>
TH	13	Musicals and AIDS? <i>Falsettoland</i> ; <i>AIDS! The Musical!</i> and <i>RENT</i>
T	18	AIDS in theatre and film today
TH	20	Guest Speaker
T	25	No Class
TH	27	No Class: Thanksgiving Holiday

## December

M	1	WORLD AIDS DAY
T	2	In Class Presentations
TH	4	In Class Presentations; course evaluations; course wrap-up

\* Note: Course Schedule subject to change at Instructor's discretion

### **Appendix C**

The following is a list of plays included in the AIDS and Theatre coursepack. These plays were given as a means of supplementing the many works within the AIDS theatre genre. Students were encouraged to read outside of class and this list was used as a springboard for further study. The listing is in no means complete, it was merely to serve as ideas for future study on the topic.

## AIDS Plays

*Night Sweat* - Robert Chesley  
*Jerker* – Robert Chesley  
*As Is* – William Hoffman  
*The Normal Heart* – Larry Kramer  
*Jeffrey-* Paul Rudnick  
*Before It Hits Home* – Cheryl West  
*Falsettoland* – William Finn  
*Love Valour Compassion* – Terrence McNally  
*Angels in America* – Tony Kushner  
*Tell* – Victor Bumbalo  
*Adam and the Experts-* Victor Bumbalo  
*A Question of Mercy* – David Rabe  
*Uncle Bob* – Austin Pendleton  
*Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens* – Bill Russell/ Janet Hood  
*RENT* – Jonathan Larson  
*The Destiny of Me* – Larry Kramer  
*In the Continuum* – Danai Salter and Nikkole Gurira (AIDS in Africa)  
*The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me-* David Drake  
*The Inner Circle* – Patricia Loughrey (AIDS and drug use)  
*Safe Sex* – Harvey Fierstein  
*Manny and Jake* – Harvey Fierstein  
*On Tidy Endings* – Harvey Fierstein  
*A Quiet End* – Robin Swados  
*An Altar Boy Talks To God* – Christopher Durang  
*Eastern Standard* – Richard Greenberg  
*Patient A* – Lee Blessing (Hospital)  
*A Poster of the Cosmos* – Lanford Wilson  
*Raft of the Medusa* – Joe Pintaro  
*Sexaholics* – Murray Schisgal  
*Zero Positive* – Harry Kondoleon  
*The Baltimore Waltz* – Paula Vogel  
*My Queer Body-* Tim Miller

## VITA

Jason V. Campbell was born in Salem, Virginia on February 2, 1980 and raised in Richmond, Virginia. He graduated with a Bachelors of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Education from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2007 after completing a two-year musical-theatre training program with Manhattan's American Musical and Dramatic Academy in 2003. As an actor, he has worked with the Fort Salem Theatre in upstate New York, the Barksdale Theatre in Richmond, Virginia, as well as the Swift Creek Mill Playhouse in Colonial Heights, Virginia. Jason has also toured with SAIL Productions out of New Jersey and The American Family Theatre out of Pennsylvania, as well as several seasons with Busch Gardens and Kings Dominion.

Jason has worked extensively with The School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community (SPARC) teaching theatre, music and dance to elementary-aged students as well as teaching several classes at Virginia Commonwealth University. Jason's directing credits include productions at VCU, including Alan Bowne's *Beirut* and work as an assistant director at the Firehouse Theatre (Richmond, VA. 2006) and assistant stage manager and assistant to the director on *The Little Dog Laughed* at the Barksdale Theatre (Richmond, VA. 2008).