

European literature is rife with great works about epidemics, from *The Magic Mountain* to *The Decameron*—and don't forget *La Bohème*. But though America has had its share of plagues, we haven't dwelled on the subject in art or entertainment. It's too fatalistic to suit the Yankee spirit of reckless optimism. Maybe that's why, aside from a few potboilers and a story by Edgar Allan Poe, there wasn't much American fiction about epidemics, until AIDS.

This plague broke all the rules. Because its first victims in the U.S. were gay men, it immediately assumed Levitical proportions. AIDS raised the specter of sinful sex in a horrifically literal way. It was a powerful metaphor for the culture wars, despite Susan Sontag's counsel to the contrary. And to gay artists, it was a moment when the personal became profoundly political. As a result, there's a vast archive of films, dances, performances, and even symphonic pieces about living with HIV. But when it comes to addressing the epidemic as a collective trauma, no medium has been more effective than theater. What we remember most, among the scores of works about AIDS, are plays.

This week is a good time to consider how the genre has evolved. The Public Theater is reviving *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's formative AIDS drama, and presenting *Biro*, a new monologue written and performed by Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine, a Ugandan American. Though most people with AIDS today are black or brown, its theatrical face is still white. *Biro* is one of the first times a black man's story of HIV has been seen on the American stage. It addresses the silent risk factors for AIDS: race and class.

Seeing both plays back to back is remarkably revealing. In *Biro*, there are drugs for HIV but no way for most Africans to afford them. In *The Normal Heart*, no one knows why gay men are dying and nothing can be done to save them. Now, these same men would probably be holding their own, unlike the African in Mwine's piece. He's in immigration jail, having entered America illegally to be treated. Kramer's characters rage at negligence and lost entitlement. Mwine's subject has no such recourse; his only weapon is determination to survive. Kramer demands attention; Mwine can only plead, "Help me."

But for all its particularity, *Biro* is also typical of recent AIDS plays. The epidemic must now be embedded in a larger story if it is to resonate. Both Paula Vogel's *The Long Christmas Ride Home* and Craig Lucas's *Small Tragedy* are about the tribulations of a social unit, either a family or a group of friends. When AIDS appears, it's just another bombshell—a thematic layer that alerts the audience to something profound. Seen against these latter-day dramas, *The Normal Heart* has the singular virtue of being an AIDS play about AIDS.

When Ned Weeks, Kramer's protagonist, burst upon the stage in 1985, I thought he was a monster from the superego. I hated his indifference to the complexity of gay sexuality, and his scorn for those who reacted with denial to a catastrophe no one could imagine. I suspected that the play's success had something to do with homophobia. Its demand that gay men "stop defining ourselves by our cocks"—and stop having sex entirely—seemed awfully like the traditional liberal response to homosexuality: Love the homo, hate the sex.

But I've made my peace with Weeks, and watching him thunder again last week I found myself thinking he'd made peace with me. He seemed less self-righteous and more willing to acknowledge his neurosis. I was so sure new speeches had been added that I watched an earlier version at the Lincoln Center Library, but the text is pretty much intact. What has changed? It could be that the current production

makes the secondary characters fuller and their conflicting points of view more potent. But my perceptions have evolved as well. I'm not so worried about the fate of homosex—it's been privatized but not pulverized. And liberal society seems more willing to accept the fact that gay men fuck. With that issue off the table, I can see the play in a less defensive light. It prefigures many issues in gay politics today, from marriage to the valuation of queer culture. It reminds us that tolerance is not the same as acceptance. It captures the early days of AIDS with unflinching clarity. And it still holds its audience rapt. Ibsen Kramer isn't, but that ain't bad for a play about a world that has changed.

There was another important AIDS play in 1985. William Hoffman's *As Is* had no stomach for hectoring, and no politics as such. Instead, it focused on a male couple coping with the ordeal, camp

humor and all. This was a more nuanced rendition of a gay relationship than Kramer's—and one that didn't require reform. *As Is* never became a cause célèbre, but it had a greater impact than *The Normal Heart* on the next wave of AIDS plays. Their theme was the nurturance that had always existed in gay society (unbeknownst to many straights). You could see this agenda in Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994). It hewed to the boys-in-the-E.R. model Craig Lucas had devised four years earlier in his film *Longtime Companion*. These domestic dramas tugged at America's heartstrings without being untruthful about gay life. They were every bit as effective as ACT UP.

But, needless to say, they left little room for irony. That became the terrain of plays like Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*, in which AIDS is evoked in an invented illness: Acquired Toilet Disease. Then there's *Angels in America*, with its grand synthesis of sex, politics, and metaphysics. These plays from the early '90s attempted to create new metaphors for AIDS, but they also pointed to a time when the epidemic would lose its symbolic power. By the new century, fewer people known in artistic circles were dying, and the anti-gay action had shifted to other issues. It became possible to create a new set of associations, in which the plague stood for the era when it arose.

Along with yuppies and club kids, there was this deadly disease back in the Reagan years that can now be dressed in retro and set to music. Curtain up; light the lights.

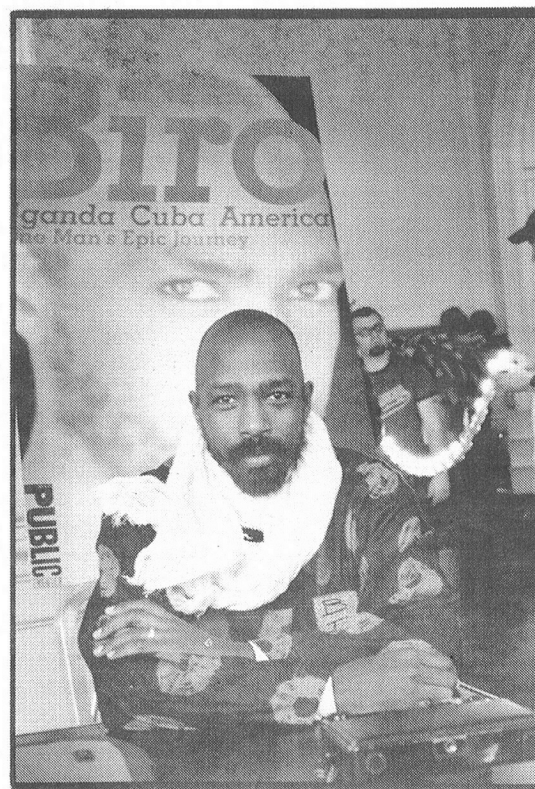
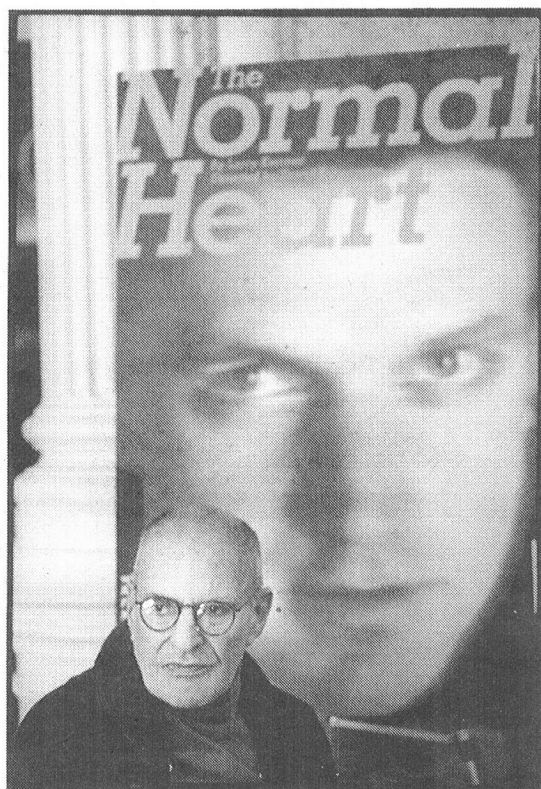
On a bleary night, Hugh Jackman could pass for '80s song-and-dance man Peter Allen. He has the dervish-in-a-Hawaiian-shirt look down. His impersonation is the main reason why people are drawn to see Allen's life story in *The Boy From Oz*. But when it comes to Kleenexing the house, there's nothing like the moment when the ghost of Allen's lover (who has died of AIDS) comes back to inspire him, or when Allen's ghost urges us to follow our dreams. Something similar happens to the trans artist Leigh Bowery in the '80s milieu musical *Taboo*. "I'm not going to be famous as an AIDS victim," he gasps. "Promise that won't be my legacy." And it's not. Before the curtain falls, he's become a source of inspiration, with one denizen of the club scene singing, "Hold up your head/Never be afraid to shine."

How did AIDS become a reprise of "You'll Never Walk Alone"? By the same process that turns war into parades. Stylization allows us to seal up the past. We can freeze the time when panic had to be managed and desire suppressed, when death was all too proud. Even *The Normal Heart* has this anesthetizing effect. It reminds me that revisiting a trauma in the comfort of the present is a good way to forget. But maybe the play has another meaning for those who never experienced AIDS in its early days. To test my reaction, I went to see it with a gay man who was a child when the epidemic struck. I was stirred but unable to connect with the viscera of my feelings. He cried and cried.

RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

The Normalizing Heart

HOW AIDS PLAYS HAVE CHANGED
SINCE LARRY KRAMER RAGED



Photograph by Sylvia Plachy

Nineteen years and counting: Larry Kramer (left) and Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine