

All the rage

Tim Teeman finds legendary activist LARRY KRAMER causing a sensation on Broadway all over again

Broadway audiences are sluttish when it comes to standing ovations. But even given their relentless enthusiasm, the reaction to the first-night preview of the revival of *The Normal Heart* in April was something else. Clapping at the ends of scenes. Cries of 'Shame' during others. Then, at the end, the kind of thunderous applause to warm any actor's heart and fire an audience's passion, conscience and, for many, painful memories.

Larry Kramer's play, first staged in 1985, is a moving, raw period piece, focusing on the early years of AIDS, from 1981-1984, the years when HIV and AIDS didn't have names, or

another and fight for healthcare under the auspices of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC, unnamed in the play), become frightened about the transmission of the disease and whether those who had it could be kissed, or even touched. One man's body is left in a giant plastic bag with the rubbish. On the first preview, the play came to a standstill when Ellen Barkin, playing a doctor trying to secure money and a smidgeon of interest from her scientific peers for her research, loses it with one of them when he snidely dismisses her. Her ringing denunciation earned a rousing round of applause.

Twenty five years after it was first

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scientific reasons for being; before the drugs, before the organisations, before anyone knew what it was that was killing mainly gay men in swathes, not just in New York, where *The Normal Heart* is set.

In the play, the city refuses to allocate money to fund prevention and advertising, while gay men, grouping together to care for one

staged, this is the first time the play has been performed on Broadway and the audience's appreciation led Kramer to note to me wryly, 'Better late than never'. Ever the indefatigable activist (he turns 76 on June 25), he hands out stirring leaflets outside the theatre every night with the message that AIDS isn't over.

At the first preview, David Furnish,

Sir Elton John's partner, was sitting two rows in front of me and later revealed he had been so affected by the play, he and Sir Elton were considering bringing it to the UK. He found it 'an astonishing, emotionally compelling piece of writing and a moving, fantastic piece of theatre that the younger generation needs to see. HIV infections and other STDs are on the rise among younger gay men. They see AIDS as something belonging to an older gay generation, which is down to poor sex education and the knowledge that AIDS is treatable with drug regimens, that it's no longer a death sentence. But drug treatments are for life. They can also go wrong or be toxic, and new strains of HIV are mutating.' Kramer is blunter: 'I want young people to see this. The world's leaders allow this plague to grow and grow.'

If you like your plays subtle and metaphorical, *The Normal Heart* – which originally starred Martin Sheen in the UK – is not for you. It is as direct as a punch in the face and as angry as a rash, which is just as you'd expect from Kramer, who is best known for his ferocious fury, not just at the injustice of homophobia, but also it seems anyone who disagrees with him. He is both an



Kramer hands out leaflets at the theatre every night with the message 'AIDS isn't over'

admirable political powerhouse, a brave force for change (when the world was a much anti-gayer place), yet also deeply divisive. He admits to his polarising character in the central character of Ned Weeks (Joe Mantello has been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Actor, alongside Al Pacino and Mark Rylance, for the role). Weeks is, Kramer tells me, himself. 'For years it was said this play was semi-autobiographical. Well it wasn't. It all happened, just as it happens on stage.'

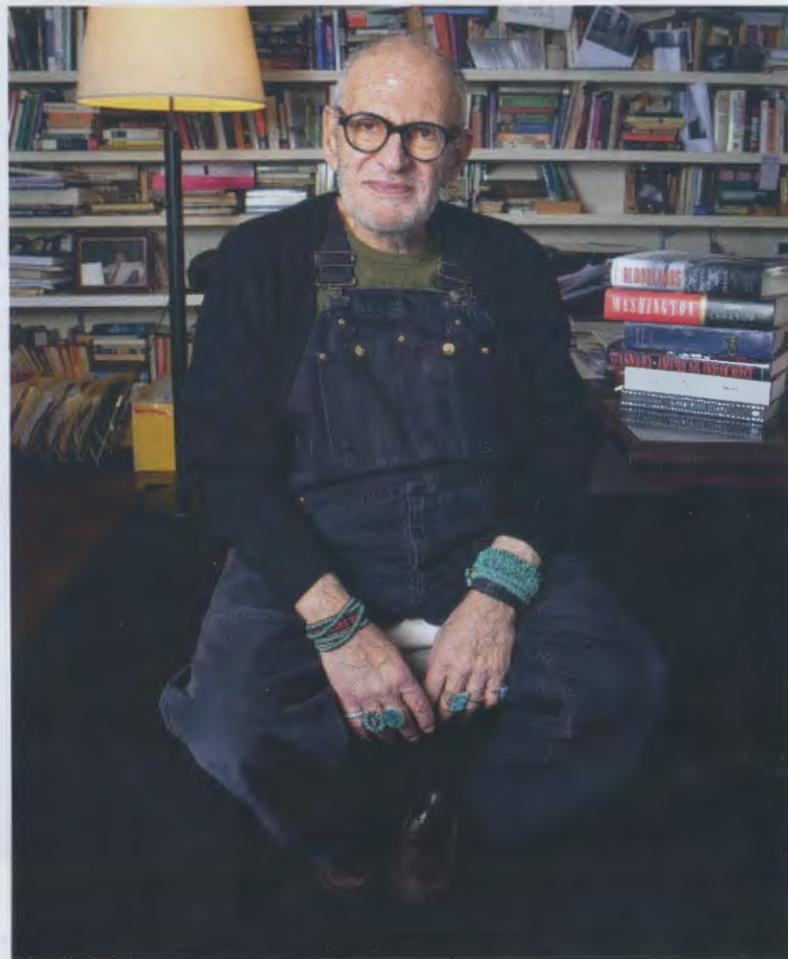
A Hollywood film of *The Normal Heart*, directed by *Glee* creator Ryan Murphy, is in development with Mark Ruffalo slated to play Ned. 'But I'm keeping my excitement in check,' laughs Kramer. 'Barbra Streisand had the rights for 10 years and nothing ever came of it.'

David Furnish told me, 'Elton and I would both like to make the production as widely seen as possible, and that includes helping fund versions of it wherever we can, including London.' Both Sir Elton and he, said Furnish, were 'angry that AIDS treatment and prevention budgets are being cut in the US, there is not enough sex education in schools. Governments in the US, UK, everywhere could, and should, be doing more to fight AIDS.'

Kramer's radical example had 'shamed' Sir Elton into 'doing more to fight AIDS', specifically setting up the Elton John AIDS Foundation 20 years ago, Furnish said. 'Elton saw what Larry was doing, and while he is a friend of ours, we don't always agree with him - he is a polarising figure - but he has always done amazing,

brave work. It's no exaggeration to say Larry made Elton feel ashamed he had done so little when he was a gay man in the mid-1980s in the throes of drug addiction. It's no coincidence that Elton got sober 21 years ago and the foundation was born a year later. Elton realised he had a lot of time to make up for, that he had to throw his hat in the ring. From that point on he has been focused on doing as much as he can to fight AIDS.'

As the play starkly relates, GMHC banished Kramer, claiming his radical activism was alienating too many potential powerful supporters and the city's politicians. Many of the group's members were in the closet and rattled by Kramer's high-profile campaigning. His view that gays should stop having promiscuous sex and demand the right to marry (so



He made Elton feel ashamed he had done so little - David Furnish on Larry Kramer

timely now), was out of step with the liberationist orthodoxy of the time. In the play, Kramer's portrayal of himself-as-Ned is unsparing and far from heroic. 'Everyone has their day in court,' Kramer tells me. It is jarring in the best possible way to hear gay men talking to each other as gay men really talk to each other, not in the pasteurised-for-prime-time way we've become so used to.

The play skewers then-New York Mayor Ed Koch for remaining closeted about his homosexuality while presiding over an administration that ignored gay men's suffering. Koch and Kramer now live in the same apartment block. 'We are separated by a lift shaft. I have nothing to say to him. He is a monstrous man who continues to disgust me,' Kramer told me. At one

Opposite page
The cast of *The Normal Heart*

Top left Larry supporting the ActUp coalition against government inaction against AIDS

Above left
Protesting NYC mayor Ed Koch's sexuality

Above right Larry at home in New York, May 2011

party Kramer was pulled away by police when he got too close to Koch. 'When I first saw him in the lobby, I screamed at him, "We don't want you here!" as loud as I could, and I was told by my landlord that we would be evicted if I did it again. So I didn't. I like my apartment too much.'

Kramer, who was diagnosed HIV-positive in the mid-1980s, almost died from hepatitis B in 2001 and was saved by a liver transplant. He was famous before *The Normal Heart* for *Faggots*, a 1978 novel that portrayed the promiscuity of the New York and Fire Island gay scenes and, after GMHC, was instrumental in the formation in 1987 of direct-action group Act-Up, whose demonstrators stopped traffic and

picketed meetings to draw attention to a lack of government action on AIDS. Further novels and plays, including *The Destiny of Me* (1992), a sequel to *The Normal Heart*, revealed Kramer's unalloyed anger and political engagement, although less memorably than *The Normal Heart*.

Ben Brantley, the chief theatre critic of *The New York Times*, whose influential reviews make or break plays, told *Attitude* that the new production of the play was 'amazing, extremely powerful. If at the original time it seemed like agit-prop, and a revival five years ago had too great a sense of distance about it, the new production gets it absolutely right. The directors Joel Grey and George C. Wolfe ensure that the characters are characters first and not merely ideological constructs. There is an



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urgency and specificity in each of them. The play is a clarion call to a narcoticised world about how people behave in a particular time of crisis. At different moments almost everyone behaves heroically, and everyone behaves badly.'

Brantley noted when it was originally staged, another play, William Hoffman's *As Is*, also featured a group of gay male characters struggling to come to terms with the impact of the then-mysterious virus, but, Brantley says, it was 'much more "Gays are people, too, let's watch those poor people suffer", whereas *The Normal Heart* loudly and angrily says this is not normal, this is a story of an unimaginable plague. Just to hear a gay man like Ned saying, "Stop having sex" was revolutionary and incendiary.' Back then, sexual promiscuity was one of the fruits of the post-Stonewall years. 'Now,' as one

of the characters shouts at Ned, 'you're suddenly telling me I'm a killer.'

For Furnish, *The Normal Heart* was 'very emotional. Not only does it seem inconceivable such ignorance and cruelty could exist now, but it reminded me of myself coming out in 1982 and how much I didn't want anyone else to know. I knew that fear, and seeing it on stage was very upsetting. It shows the beginnings of smashing that fear and the power of gay men harnessed by uniting. With the knowledge we now have, I would say the message to gay men is: have sex, but if that sex is anything other than exclusive with one partner, always have safe sex. I'm 48 and that was drilled into my generation, but now, as you can see with infection rates among younger people, the message is not getting through.'

Not all gay men have hailed *The Normal Heart*. 'It left me cold,' said

Top right
Kramer protesting

Centre right
A scene from the play

Bottom right Larry with film critic Vito Russo, who died of AIDS in 1990



a writer who has known Kramer for 25 years professionally and socially, yet who wished to remain anonymous for fear of attracting a dose of his notorious ire. 'I think it probably has more to do with my direct experience with that period in history and GMHC than with the play. I was one of those early volunteer "crisis intervention workers" who were sent to the hospital to deal with the sick and dying. Those years were so traumatic as people around me got sick and died, including former boyfriends and my best friend's lover. During the show I mostly sat on my hands and waited for the screaming to end. It was a terrible, terrible time and it was hard seeing it re-enacted on stage, especially with Larry leading the charge. Larry's role during the AIDS crisis was a key one, but he was also monolithically divisive, destructive and self-destructive. I think he is kind to himself in *The Normal Heart* when he calls himself an asshole. He's more

of a self-destructive monster than an asshole. I don't know what his diagnosable emotional problems are, or maybe they're undiagnosed, but he has the uncanny ability to go at his friends and supporters with the same viciousness as he attacks his enemies, or at least those he identifies as his enemies.'

Kramer's reputation of blow-ups and confrontations precedes him. In 2009 he wrote a furious letter to a newspaper accusing them of misrepresenting Rodger McFarlane, with whom he had a vexed, though close relationship – first as lovers, then as cohorts at GMHC, from which McFarlane jettisoned Kramer (which features in the play). He has feuded royally, with – among others – Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*.

After Kramer accused young gays

curiosity about gay history. Where are you finding all these tragic gay men who don't care about their history? So many that you can make these universal declarations about my generation?... I ask that maybe you talk to some of us who are trying to bridge the gap before you condemn us all next time.'

Brantley, reflecting on the death in May of the playwright, stage director and screenwriter Arthur Laurents (most famous for writing *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *La Cage Aux Folles*), said he and Kramer were noted for 'never being afraid of antagonising people. For both, anger seems a rejuvenating elixir'. Brantley doesn't know if Kramer is the 'monster' some have claimed he is, 'but even if he was, should that take away from his bravery, activism and achievements? Of course not. To make a major

To make a major impression in politics or the arts you have to be a monster – it's part of the job

of 'turning their back on history' in a recent *Salon* interview, one younger gay man, J Ricky Price, wrote a stinging rebuke. After paying tribute to Kramer's activism, Price wrote, 'I respectfully ask you to shut the fuck up about the tragedy of my generation. I cannot sit idly by as you continue to ignore my generation's contribution to the history of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) folk. Yes, we came of age after the plague. Yes, coming out of the closet is much easier because of the path forged by the generations that came before us. Yes, we must use a condom every time we have sex. Yes, there is still a lot of fucking work to do.' But, Price adds, 'I am constantly shocked at how many young people volunteer unselfishly for advocacy groups for gay elders, simply because they are starving for connection with LGBTQ elders. In fact, rarely do I meet a young LGBTQ person who is not intensely interested in connecting with previous generations, or someone who doesn't have some

impression in politics or the arts, you have to be a monster – it's part of the job description.'

Kramer's passion remains undimmed. 'Obama has not been a very good leader for anybody, and certainly not for gay people,' he tells me. 'There is still no national AIDS strategy. The plague grows and grows. Gay people continue to be unable to unite in a meaningful way. I don't think we'll ever win true equality. Too many people hate us. What we need are laws to protect us from the hate.'

He sounds pessimistic, I say. 'Actually I have always been an optimist by nature, fortunately, which allows me to have pessimistic views.' This is said with an audible smile. So how angry is he? 'I'm still angry about the inequality gay people face and the suffering of all those marginalised by society,' Kramer growls. 'I hope I die angry.' *The Normal Heart* runs until 10 July at the Golden Theatre, 252 West 45th Street, New York. thenormalheartbroadway.com

CHANGING FACES

Aids represented on screen and stage



ANGELS IN AMERICA (2003)

Tony Kushner's hard-hitting six-hour epic. Meryl Streep, Al Pacino and Emma Thompson star in the TV version.



JEFFERY (1995)

Campy romcom about a man trying to find love as friends die around him. Patrick Stewart gives a star turn.



MY NIGHT WITH REG (1997)

Brilliant Royal Court Theatre play that transferred to the West End, but not quite so well to TV adaptation.



PARTING GLANCES (1986)

Steve Buscemi stars as a New York man living with AIDS as his friends try to cope.



LONGTIME COMPANION (1989)

Harrowing drama about the lives of a group of NYC gay men living with HIV and AIDS. Bold and brave.