



REVIVAL THAT TUGS AT HISTORY'S 'HEART' STRINGS: (left to right) Lee Pace, Ellen Barkin, Wayne Alan Wilcox, Patrick Breen, Jim Parsons, Joe Mantello, John Benjamin Hickey, Luke Macfarlane, Richard Topol and Mark Harelik in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The Normal Heart:

Revival throbs with historical vitality



THE NORMAL HEART

Written by Larry Kramer

Directed by Joel Grey & George C. Wolfe

John Golden Theatre

252 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), TheNormalHeartBroadway.com

By Scott Harrah

Nothing about this powerful revival of Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart* is the least bit dated. In fact, it is even more topical now, in this era of political battles over health care and same-sex marriage. Twenty-six years later, the show's depiction of the early days of AIDS and the ignorance, mystery and all-encompassing grief and denial that ravaged the gay community at the time is eerily profound and prophetic. In addition, it is quite simply dynamic theater that will move anyone who lived through the era to the present to tears. The younger generation that is unfamiliar with what really happened to gay people in the 1980s and 1990s must see this show for the sobering history it depicts, and the viral massacre of gay men who literally died for the rights that young gays take for granted now.

AIDS, to the gay community 30 years ago, was a scary phenomenon, particularly because no one knew the bleak scale of what was really unfolding. The New York Times, then a conservative newspaper, would not even publish articles about the disease on its front page. The president would not mention the epidemic's name. Despite all the silence, news of more gay men dying each day was almost incomprehensible. Anyone who lived through this tragedy in America remembers how, to get anyone to listen or care, early activists had to stress that "AIDS is not a gay disease." While that ultimately turned out to be true, people of all ages and backgrounds need to understand the tremendous loss, bigotry, and shame that gay men experienced. The lead character in the show, Jewish writer/activist Ned Weeks (portrayed with searing intensity by Joe Mantello). argues with New York Times reporter and soon-to-be boyfriend Felix (John Benjamin Hickey) about the similarities between the early silence, fear, and denial

of what Hitler was doing to Jews in 1930s Europe to the lackadaisical attitude of America about AIDS in the early 1980s. Ned, based on Larry Kramer himself, sounds a bit crazy to Felix, but in retrospect, from a 21st century perspective, the guy makes perfect sense. The comparisons are haunting.

This is a heavy, often difficult show to watch, but it is by far the most emotionally explosive show on Broadway in years. Its original 1985 production at the Public Theater may have seemed like a preachy polemic, but today it is simply a time capsule that brings back all the horror and heartbreak of AIDS, with the magnificent pace of a thriller. Depicting the events that transpired in New York City between July 1981 and May 1984, under the Koch Administration, Ned Weeks with the help of a handful of men creates Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), a grass-roots organization that provides a hotline and education about the disease.

Ellen Barkin is gut-wrenchingly effective and mesmerizing as Dr. Emma Brookner, a polio-stricken doctor in a wheelchair who treats some of the very first cases in New York City. She urges Ned Weeks, a reporter for the New York Native, to write about something nobody wanted to hear at the time: Gay men had to stop having promiscuous sex if they wanted to survive the epidemic. The theatrical fireworks truly ignite when she is denied funding and she lashes out at her medical colleagues in an angry monologue in act two that proves that this show is a timeless classic. "Who cares if another faggot dies?" she shrieks. The audience's reaction to Barkin's onstage tirade is unprecedented because the applause literally went on for at least a minute when she was finished.

However, it is not just Barkin's portrayal of the doctor that gets us riled up and brings back all those ugly memories. The whole cast works brilliantly as an ensemble, under the expert direction of Joel Grey and George C. Wolfe. John Benjamin Hickey, as Felix, displays an exhausting character arc: He goes from being a closeted, smug fashion writer for the New York Times to a man that falls in love with Ned (someone who seems incapable of ever having a relationship), and his final scene with Ned's brother is remarkably touching. Lee Pace is memorable as the handsome Citibank executive Bruce Niles, a man tapped to become the president of GMHC because he is better looking, less abrasive and, therefore, more palatable to gays and straights alike than the controversial Ned. Also noteworthy is Patrick Breen, as New York City health worker and GMHC founding member Mickey Marcus, and "Big Bang Theory" star Jim Parsons provides much-needed levity as the self-described "Southern queen" Tommy Boatwright.

It is shocking now to think that *The Normal Heart* never won a Pulitzer Prize for drama when it debuted in 1985, but one has to realize that no one, gay or straight, wanted to face the reality Mr. Kramer was rubbing in our faces back then. In 2011, however, *The Normal Heart* is a first-class dramatic testament that is a definitive reminder of how AIDS changed America in so many ways, and why we must never forget what truly happened, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us.

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Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

Broadway Listings

NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

CRITIC'S CHOICE: BEST THEATRICAL EVENT OF THE YEAR



STAGEZINE CRITIC'S CHOICE, 'THE NORMAL HEART': (left to right) Lee Pace, Jim Parsons, Joe Mantello and Patrick Breen in Larry Kramer's 'The Normal Heart.' Photo: Joan Marcus



THE NORMAL HEART

Simply stated, the best play I have seen this 2010-11 season. In fact, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* ranks among one of the best American plays written in the last 25 years. Having first seen it in 1985, the fear and confusion of the times made the play seem preachy and pushy. One watched it with fear and anxiety because there were no answers forthcoming of what this deadly disease was. The body count was climbing, there was no funding, and no preventive medicine in sight. One did not want to have the mirror of truth glaring back at them with grim realities. Abstinence seemed like an impossible feat.

Thanks to Mr. Kramer's brilliant writing, this play is probably more relevant now than when it was first written. Back then, it was a jolt and a wake-up call to the gay community. Today, it is an extensive documentation and a valuable history lesson for the younger generation to learn what their predecessors went through and had to endure: How an entire nation turned its back on this deadly disease as "the gay men's problem," and the gay community eventually had to band together and form their own task force to bring awareness. Thanks must also be given to Mr. Kramer, for being one of the founding fathers of GMHC and its hotline for information.

In addition to the brilliant writing, this revival ranks among one of the best acting ensembles in years, thanks to the expert direction by Joel Grey and George C. Wolfe. There are genuine, heartfelt performances by each member of the cast. However, the six main leads do stand out: Joe Mantello, long absent from the acting venue, last appearing in *Angels in America* in 1994, has become one of America's most prolific directors. Playing activist Ned Weeks, Larry Kramer's alter ego, Mr. Mantello is nothing short of brilliant. Ellen Barkin as Dr. Emma Brookner, the first to treat the gay men and the epidemic, is incandescent. John Benjamin Hickey (Felix Turner and journalist for the NY Times) as Ned's eventual lover, gives the evening's gut-wrenching performance. Jim Parsons of TV's "Big Bang Theory" supplies the evening's comic relief in grand style. Lee Pace and Patrick Breen, playing additional founding members of GMHC, have extraordinary moments of their own, retelling their stories and their experiences with this epidemic. Mark Harelik, Luke Macfarlane, Richard Topol, and Wayne Alan Wilcox complete the ensemble beautifully. As an added footnote, there is no shame in shedding tears. You will not be alone. At the performance I attended, there was not a dry eye in the house; yours truly included.

GOLDEN THEATRE, 252 West 45th Street, (212-239-6200).

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