AIDS-Involved Drama Syndrome

One playwright's tale of how he got the bug

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If there is one thing you can say about AIDS, it sure has infected theater in America. Yes, AIDS-Involved Drama Syndrome (AIDS) is the prime cause of countless plays, performance pieces, anthologies and critical works preoccupying some of America's most talented playwrights, sapping them of their ability to write about much else. The following is my first attempt to describe this hitherto undocumented disease process. As I have not yet conducted research into the effect of AIDS in the lives of other playwrights, I have been forced to use myself as a case study.

The first playwright I know who came down with theater-related AIDS was Robert Chesley; the first symptom was his play *Night Sweats*, which I saw in June 1984. *Night Sweats* claimed that the epidemic, which then seemed to be singling out gay men, Haitians and people with hemophilia, resulted from a government plot to kill homosexuals. Chesley claimed the Feds, with the cooperation of greedy capitalist bathhouse owners, were carrying out a top-level policy decision to infect gays in their native habitat, in their most vulnerable position: Drugged and sexually free.

I remember *Night Sweats* as two acts of '60s-style paranoia of the Amerika's-gonna-getcha variety. But maybe I'm being harsh. I confess my reaction was tinged with the teensiest bit of jealousy. I probably said to my lover at the time, "How good it is to have a comrade in this struggle with a deadly epidemic that everyone wants to avoid talking about." But underneath I was probably seething: "How dare that fucker beat me to it?"

In 1984 I was beginning to workshop *As Is* at Circle Rep. Many people were beginning to think that AIDS -- that is, the immune-deficiency kind -- was going to hit big. So what was more natural than to want my play to be a big hit? Though I never would have put it that way then.

I view many of my feelings as typical of a playwright in the throes of AIDS-Involved Drama Syndrome. Competitiveness, possessiveness, thy name is AIDS playwright. Many of us secretly felt we had a copyright on the subject, and that all other writers were self-seeking poachers. We feared people would see through our high-minded rhetoric. But on the rare occasions they did, we counterattacked with a still higher-mindedness.

But in 1984 I lacked my present awareness. And who could have foreseen that only two years later, Chesley would write the brilliant *Jerker*, a telephone-sex handkerchief-wringer, mingling dirty talk with a moving spirituality? Chesley was enormously gifted as a composer, having introduced

the haunting song “Autumn,” which might just be the most beautiful work of art produced in the current plague era, back in 1966. Courageous and honest, dear, sweet, brilliant Robert Chesley died of the plague in 1990.

In retrospect, I believe I was infected with theater-related AIDS in 1981. I’m convinced the real genesis of *As Is* came one day while I was reading The *New York Times* about the deaths of some gay guys on Fire Island and in the Castro. Doctors, please note that AIDS of the dramatic kind is spread by verbal means: By words in print and word of mouth.

Mine was a classic case. My first symptom was feverish laughter. Upon reading the *Times* article, I broke up and said something like, “They must have died of a combination of quiche and poppers.”

My next symptom, which occurred after a period of a sharply increasing number of deaths, was night terrors. “That could have been me,” was the emotion I had after someone I’d had an affair with years before was rushed to the hospital in a coma. And shortly after that, I experienced overwhelming grief. I just couldn’t stop crying. It felt as if I were witnessing the death of my entire youth. I was. This stage alternated with the former for quite a long time.

But after a year, grief and terror were replaced by bouts of Messianic expansiveness and optimism, from which I suffer to this day. I imagined that God had chosen me to enlighten humanity (actually New York City) about the new plague. Please note that never once did I entertain the slightest suspicion that God might have requested other playwrights to pitch in. For only I had special knowledge.

Why, you may ask. Because I knew my history. I had studied Latin and some science, and had performed lots of original historical research. I was well-acquainted with the various plagues of yore: the black one, the white one, syphilis, polio. I had read Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Years*, Camus’ *The Plague*. And my mother told me lots about the incurable love-linked disease of syphilis of her youth in Latvia in the 1920s, much of which paralleled the current epidemic. And one of my closest childhood friends died of infantile paralysis. As I wrote in a journal: “We of the proud ’60s and ’70s thought that infectious disease was a thing of the past. ’Bullshit!’ is History’s reply.”

I also thought I had a unique perception of the plague because most of my large family disappeared in the Holocaust, when I was a small child. I felt I knew them intimately, because my parents talked about them a lot. So losing people to the plague was *déjà vu* to me. I was haunted by the fact that the Jews in Europe died unwanted, unwarned, unhelped. But I could do something to save the gays in America. In 1984 I could tell them and the rest of America of the danger they were choosing to ignore. I knew what had to be done. Blow the ram’s horn! Tell the world! Write a play!

I was convinced *As Is* had the power to reshape the habits of a gay community bent on destroying itself through booze, drugs and not going to bed with me. *As Is* would produce an uplifting of the spirit not seen since the Sinai days.

I was glad *Night Sweats* was more or less ignored. I breathed easier for a while. But just about the time Marshall W. Mason was directing the last workshops of *As Is*, catastrophe struck. We heard Joe Papp was going to produce Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theater.

We all lipsynched to the tune of "My, won't it be helpful to have two plays on the subject up and running. Think of the synergy!" But the reality was the Rep and the Public raced each other to the starting gate. Of course, having read *Faggots*, I was sure *The Normal Heart* would have none of the human warmth and spirituality of *As Is*. Kramer was probably saying equally noble things about my work.

As Is opened at Circle Rep on March 10, 1985, and moved to Broadway's Lyceum Theater on May 1. *The Normal Heart* opened at the Public Theater on April 21, 1985. Both reached large audiences and received huge amounts of publicity. The synergistic effect of their nearly concurrent openings helped bring the raging epidemic to the attention of the country (all theater people think they get the attention of the world when *The New York Times* runs a picture with its review).

A little-remarked outcome of *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* was to fix the parameters of the AIDS play as a genre. Both plays center on boldly honest but graceless Jewish men who are forced to deal with their ungrateful and unfaithful Christian lovers who are dying of the virus. (*Angels in America* continues the pattern of Jew without the disease married to goy with disease, but the goy is the sweetie in his play and the Jew has the unendearing traits.) Both Jewish men have brothers who treat them badly but are capable of changing their ways. By the end, both heroically conquer all odds and marry their intendeds on their deathbeds.

Boing! I swear on a pile of naked angels, I never knew much about Kramer's play until I saw it in previews. I'm sure the same is true about Kramer and my work. Who had the time or the interest to read the other's work? I was positive I knew everything worth knowing about the subject. Maybe Kramer felt that way, too. Amazingly, without the conscious cooperation of the other, the two of us managed to invent what has since become a cliché. How do you like that for Zeitgeist?

But outside these strange similarities in character and plot, the attitudes of the two works differed radically. Like Robert Chesley, Tony Kushner and Jonathan Larson, in his musical *Rent*, Kramer saw something suspicious in the very existence of the epidemic. How convenient the plague was for Ronald Reagan, the old *New York Times*, the forces of capitalism, and Right Wing extremists.

My attitude was very different. I was immune to thinking that our particular plague, or the panicked reaction to it, was all that special. I saw no reason to suspect foul play in the existence of the epidemic. I viewed as sick and evil the hatred and fear for those who were ill, but thought it absolutely par for the course. The history of the human race is largely that of war and pestilence. Why should our era have remained any more immune than our bodies?

What government in what era has ever helped the helpless? In Europe during the Black Plague, Jews and old women and even their pet cats accused of having Satanic powers to create and spread pestilence were burned at the stake.

We want to believe we have more power than we have, or our version of God has such a power, so the arrival of a death-dealing disease is often seen by both the victim and the victim's neighbors as suspicious at best. "Why me?" "Why them?" we always ask ourselves. Choose one or more of the following answers: [they're wicked] [they're being punished for their sins][they're lazy] [black][gay][inferior][stupid][chosen by God][rebuked by God][paying for his/her sins][paying for our sins][deficient in gratitude][unconsciously choosing to be ill][addicted to suffering][working out karma], whatever. Never is a person just plain old sick. Never is the bug just plain hungry.

What I do find unique in the current plague is the determination of the people who have the disease, and their friends and families, not to put up with the savagery history has traditionally had in store for the likes of them. In any other time and culture, this sensational rebellion would have been put down ruthlessly. But led by chronic complainers afflicted with unrealistic messianic dreams, we the powerless have attained a tiny measure of power and influence. Enough to bring us a glimmer of hope that a cure might be possible some day for some of us if we had enough money and were fortunate enough toSwell, you know the rest.

What's going to happen in the future to dramatists who've become dependent on a plague for theatrical, spiritual, and, in some cases, financial nourishment?

Will the passage of time and a proven cure move *As Is* out of the genre of AIDS play into family drama? Half a century and the discovery of penicillin moved Ibsen's *Ghosts* from being a syphilis play into a play about a family.

Part of me doesn't care at all. I wasn't thinking of posterity when I wrote *As Is*. I was thinking, "Wake up, people, wake up!" It woke me up. Or a part of me, anyhow. You know, that other part. The part that has always been addicted to questions of life and death. They infect all of us who have sought to deal with the epidemic. Chesley. Kramer. Kushner. Me.

As well as so many storytellers who have been pressed so violently, so urgently, and so often to reach deep within themselves and grasp the oldest thing in their souls: Death is the fact of life.

The question now: How will I live?

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