The Normal Heart: From Stage to Screen

Joe Mantello, who starred in the Broadway production, appears in the HBO version as well. Here, he discusses this piece of theater history.

May 19, 2014 By Benjamin Ryan

Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart has finally made it to the screen. First produced off-Broadway in 1985, this theatrical cri de coeur chronicles the devastating early years of the AIDS crisis in New York City, with the fictionalized Ned Weeks standing in for Kramer as he and a small band of brothers found Gay Men's Health Crisis, the world's first AIDS service organization. (Kramer cofounded both GMHC and the activist group ACT UP). Facing a political and medical establishment that turns its back on the legions of gay men dying of a new and mysterious disease, the company of men ultimately descends into civil war over how best to battle for their own survival.

Written for the screen by Kramer and Ryan Murphy (Glee), who applies a loving yet firm directing hand to the emotionally wrenching film, The Normal Heart debuts on HBO May 25. An all-star cast, bringing the play to cinematic life with efforts sure to inspire Golden Globe and Emmy buzz, not to mention innumerable soaked hankies, includes Mark Ruffalo (The Kids Are All Right), Matt Bomer (White Collar), Taylor Kitsch (Lone Survivor), Jim Parsons (The Big Bang Theory), Alfred Molina (An Education) and an America's-sweetheart-no-more Julia Roberts as Dr. Emma Brookner, the no-nonsense polio survivor who reads gay men the riot act about the dangers of AIDS all while demonstrating singular compassion for their suffering.



Mark Ruffalo in The Normal Heart Jojo Whilden/HBO

Supporting cast member Joe Mantello made his Broadway debut as an actor in 1993, creating the role of Louis in Tony Kushner's Angels in America, a play that shares the mantle with Kramer's as one of the two most important theatrical explorations of AIDS. Mantello then put acting aside for a vastly successful directing career that includes the Broadway juggernaut Wicked as well as Tony Awards for Take Me Out and Assassins. Returning to the stage in 2011, he delivered a devastating performance as Ned Weeks in the critically acclaimed Broadway production of The Normal Heart. In a role that might tempt lesser actors to simply turn the emotional and decibel dial to 1,000, Mantello delivered a nuanced take on the tormented character, deftly balancing the conflicting layers of rage, desperation, humor and endearing empathy that Kramer wove into this critical examination of his own famously colorful and often tempestuous personality.

For the HBO film verison, Mantello assumes the role of Mickey Marcus, a New York City Department of Health official who, along with Ned Weeks, is among the founding members of GMHC. Ruffalo, meanwhile, gives his own uniquely commanding performance as Weeks—his aging baby face and puppy-dog eyes tragically effecting the child-like helplessness of a man whose voice is loud enough to bring an army of men to their feet, but who still can't save the man most dear to him.

Mantello took some time out of his busy schedule directing the new Broadway musical The Last

Ship to speak to POZ about his experience in both the theatrical and film iterations of The Normal Heart, as well as about living as a gay man in New York City in the 1980s, working with Julia Roberts, and that time Larry Kramer screamed into his answering machine…

What do you hope people will get out of seeing The Normal Heart on the screen?

I want the film to be an essential document of that time, so that terrible part of our history, a not-so-recent history, is never forgotten.

Yes, we seem to be losing touch with that part of our history.

I saw Terrance McNally's play, Mothers and Sons, recently. And there's a passage in the play that deals with this: that the memory is fraying around the edges already, and soon it's going to be gone. I feel like perhaps that's OK, if the world is indeed a better place. But I don't know that it is. Many people are being infected every day, still.

How do you feel about the younger generation of gay men and how they see HIV?

It's hard to hold people accountable, because the way information is disseminated these days is so very, very different. I came to New York City in 1984, and I remember being so terrified and confused and completely thrown by [the AIDS crisis]. At the time, in order to get the information, I had to go to the center of it. In person. I became a buddy at GMHC. [Buddies volunteered to help people with AIDS.] I wish I could say that it was an altruistic move on my part. But I think in some way there was something selfish about it, that I wanted to understand it, or face it, or look at it. It's not a photo that you can Google. If you are sitting in someone's hospital room and they're struggling with this disease, you encounter the world in a very, very different way. I do feel like the world [today] just seems much more self-obsessed in some way—or selfie obsessed.

What was your most meaningful response from someone who saw the Broadway production?

I remember young men afterward—they looked stricken. It was as if they had seen something that was a piece of science fiction. For them to really understand on some level that there was a time when information [about HIV] didn't exist and people were fighting this kind of invisible monster.

Describe the emotional experience of being in eight shows a week on Broadway.

There was something very cathartic about it. I think that was true for the entire company of actors. Our director, George C. Wolfe, said something early on which I think everyone felt became the overriding thrust of how to play Larry's play: that there's this invisible monster and it's snatching your friends one by one, and the only weapon you have is language.

How would you compare Tony Kushner's Angels in America to The Normal Heart?

Larry was creating a kind of living document from the front lines, while Tony had the luxury of time so he could add theatricality to it. There was a kind of playfulness, whereas Larry needed to get the information out right away.

What new strengths does the medium of the screen bring to the telling of The Normal Heart? To me one of the most affecting is that we can see right up close the visual horrors of how AIDS can ravage the body.

Whereas in the play, [Kramer] chose to narrowly focus on this small group of men, heroic men, who came together to start this organization, in the film we were able to expand the scope of the story. So you see Ned going to Washington. You see the first fundraiser that they have and how many people showed up for it. So the story exists in a larger context.

I understand you've met the man Mickey was in-part based upon. What did you learn from talking to him?

His name is Dr. Lawrence Mass. We had lunch together. He said Larry [Kramer] had an intuitive sense of how this virus was being passed. [Mass had] come from all these years and years of fighting for our [sexual] liberation, and here was this man who was saying, "No, no, we must stop having sex. We must stop with anonymous sex, with endless sex, with random sex between each other." And Larry Mass said, "I took it as a personal affront. It was kind of a dismissal of my life's work." [Mass] said, "'Sorry, I fought too hard for our right to make love wherever and whenever.' But on the other hand, [Kramer] was right."

Matt Bomer's character, Felix Turner, says in the film, "Men do not naturally not love. They learn not to."

I think sexuality used as a currency—there's a cost to that. And the cost is perhaps the erosion of a certain kind of compassion and sensitivity toward one another as human beings.

What's your best Larry Kramer anecdote?

Years ago, my boyfriend at the time [Jon Robin Baitz] was a playwright and [he and Kramer] became friends. We started hanging out with him. And then Robbie, my boyfriend, was going to write the screenplay of The Normal Heart for Barbra Streisand. It didn't work out, and Larry somehow found out about it. And he left this scathing message on our answering machine, calling Robbie a traitor—the wrath of Larry that everyone has heard about. And he ended it, saying, "And you and your boyfriend broke my vacuum cleaner!"

Then, years later, when I went to see the revival [of The Normal Heart] off-Broadway, Larry came up to me, and he was incredibly sweet. He said, "Why don't we see each other anymore?" I said, "Well, you yelled at me! And you made me feel like you didn't want to have a relationship with me." He said, "Oh, that was a long time ago. I'm over that!" That's sort of what it is with Larry. I think he's definitely mellowed by now.

In the film, Ned Weeks's older brother, played so beautifully by Alfred Molina, says that Ned Weeks tried to kill himself while he was at Yale. What would the world be like had it not been for Larry Kramer?

I think the loss would have been enormous. I believe Dr. [Anthony S.] Fauci [director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, once said], "There's medicine before Larry Kramer, and there's medicine after Larry Kramer." I think [Kramer] demanded a certain kind of transparency and a care and compassion and immediate response [from the medical establishment] that I think wasn't there before.

[The quote comes from a 2002 New Yorker profile on Kramer, in which Fauci said, "In American medicine, there are two eras: before Larry and after Larry. There is no question in my mind that Larry helped change medicine in this country. And he helped change it for the better. When all the screaming and the histrionics are forgotten, that will remain."]

You directed Julia Roberts in Three Days of Rain on Broadway in 2006. How would you describe her as an artist?

She's absolutely delightful. She's a really hard worker. She's incredibly intelligent and curious, as I think most intelligent people are. She was lovely to work with.

Were there any particular loved ones you kept in mind during the Broadway run of The Normal Heart or while making the film?

Yes, my closest friend and college roommate died about five years ago [of complications related to AIDS]. When I first saw The Normal Heart, I loved the play so much that I gathered a group of my friends and we did a reading of it in our living room and I played Ned and he played Felix. When we did the Broadway production, I hadn't acted in 17 years. And I remember, before going on the first night, sort of saying to him, "OK, help me out here." Probably for the first five performances I had his photo in my pocket, just as a bit of strength from him.

You're directing The Last Ship, which is a new musical slated to open on Broadway in October, with music and lyrics by Sting and a book by Brian Yorkey and John Logan. Tell us a bit about the show.

The idea originated with Sting. He grew up just outside Newcastle in a little town called Wallsend [in England] where the local industry was ship building. And one day that industry dried up. Then he saw a story in The New York Times about this Polish town where there was a similar story of the industry drying up, and this local priest looking out on the landscape of the community, seeing that people were depressed and lost and aimless. And [the priest] said, "All right, we're going to get together, and we're going to build one last ship." I think in some way the musical is both naturalistic and allegorical. These guys getting together to do this one last thing.

You also recently directed Manhattan Theater Club's production of Harvey Fierstein's Casa Valentina, currently running on Broadway, which is about a community of cross-dressing

heterosexual men in a Catskills resort in the 1960s. Who knew about such a subculture.

Like most people, I thought that there was some other story, that they were of course closeted men who were restricted by the time, so that this was their form of self-expression. I found to my surprise that this is not the case. So it was eye-opening and fascinating and kind of an elusive thing to discover with this group of actors. Because it couldn't be campy. They weren't drag queens, they were something else—and something else that I had never seen before onstage.

The Normal Heart premiers on HBO at 9pm ET/PT, Sunday, May 25.

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