The Normal Heartache

Reviving-and reliving-Larry Kramer's landmark production

August 1, 2004 By Dennis Daniel

When I heard that New York's Public Theater was reviving *The Normal Heart*—activist and playwright Larry Kramer's 1985 tirade against America's AIDS ineptitude—a time capsule of painful memories unearthed within me. But I knew I had to see it. As I sat waiting for the show to begin, I could remember almost nothing about the play I had once directed myself. But as the actors took the stage, I was whisked back to 1987, when I was surrounded, like the characters, by the fear, frustration and hopelessness of AIDS in its infancy.

You see, in '87—right after Kramer's play closed—Nick, my partner of four years, developed early symptoms of an HIV-related arthritis that would slowly rob him of his mobility. I was finishing up my master's degree in theater at Brooklyn College and needed to direct a play as a thesis project. I wanted to raise AIDS awareness, but in retrospect, I realize I was hoping to exorcise my own fears as well.

I was ecstatic when Larry Kramer called me with his personal OK to stage *The Normal Heart*. The play tackled so many of the issues Nick and I were facing: doctors without answers, the absence of treatment and the ignorance of just about everybody. Our rehearsals proved challenging and cathartic, often ending with my cast and me sobbing in a circle on the floor.

Nearly two decades later, *The Normal Heart* remains shockingly relevant. Once again, I was assaulted by characters' raw emotions as they raged, yelled, cried and loved anew for me. Kramer's Cassandra-like prophecies about far-flung mortality figures have come terrifyingly true. After all these years, we're still fighting many of the same battles alongside the play's pioneering militants, especially with regard to prevention education. After a restrained yet heartfelt curtain call, I shuffled out in stunned silence with the rest of the audience.

I earned my theater degree in 1988 but have since spent most of my time at *POZ*, dedicated to enlightening the world about AIDS. Nick died in 1990. Fortunately for us all, Larry Kramer—and *The Normal Heart*—beats on.

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