Whose Culture Is It Anyway?

June 3, 2014 By Paul Kawata

Last week I had the privilege to watch Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart on HBO. This week, I saw Terrence McNally's latest Broadway play, Mothers and Sons. The first was about the early days in the epidemic and the later examines life after the epidemic's wrath. I cried, I laughed, I remembered. I hope they both sweep the awards season. However, I am concerned that this cannot be the only narrative of our movement's history.

Both the movie and the play are about beautiful, rich, white, gay men who live in New York. Not that there is anything wrong with that, it's just that our story is so much bigger. Where are the stories about women and AIDS? Who's writing about black gay men? When will we get the definitive biography about the trans community and their struggle to end the epidemic. Why aren't there stories about injection drug users who lead the charge on needle exchange? What about all the gay men who don't live in New York, San Francisco or Los Angeles.

Don't get me wrong, Matt Bomer in The Normal Heart was a revelation. Tyne Daley in Mothers and Sons reminded me of my mother, except with much better comedic timing. It's just that we all of us don't have homes in the Pines or apartments with views of Central Park (you will have to see the movie and the play to understand these references). I don't begrudge these talented writers, directors and actors. I am just concerned that their stories will define and limit our epidemic. I'm asking Hollywood and Broadway to do more.

The HIV epidemic cannot only be defined by the Normal Heart, Mothers and Sons, Angles in America, Falsettoland, Philadelphia, Dallas Buyers Club, Longtime Companion, And the Band Played On, We Were Here, or How To Survive A Plague. Wouldn't you love to see a movie where Lupita Nyong'o plays a lesbian AIDS activist fighting to help her gay brother living with HIV? Making his big screen debut as the gay brother is Pharrell Williams! The score for the movie could be composed by Frank Ocean.

Philadelphia was released in 1993 at the height of the epidemic. Tom Hanks gave the performance of his career. He opened a window to our fight. For some people, he was their first exposure to the epidemic, other than the often inaccurate and stigmatizing nightly news stories. He helped to translate the compassion, courage and strength it took to fight AIDS in those early years. The disease was no longer about "them." Mr. Hanks was a familiar face and a beloved actor. He made us human in a world that felt like it had lost its humanity. Twenty years later, it's time for some

new heroes. All of us need to give voice to what it means to fight an epidemic. One day I hope to write my story, not that its special. I am not sure how to adequately capture the pain, loss and sorrow of the early years, I just know that our stories and our heroes need to be remembered in all of their diversity.

Yours in the struggle,

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