

Down a blind alley

By making the Reagans into caricatures, Kramer actually makes it harder to take their evil seriously

BY ED SCHIFFER

Just Say No: A Play About a Farce, by Larry Kramer. St. Martin's Press, 1989. 104 pages. \$12.95

At one point in Larry Kramer's *Just Say No*, a character declares, "I'm tired of being a hag fag. Is this a way to live out one's life? I think it's time to change the world." In some sense, this has been the burden of all of Kramer's work since AIDS, but his latest play suggests Kramer doesn't know how best to act on that realization.

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Subtitled "A Play About a Farce," *Just Say No* uses the broadest imaginable strokes to lambaste the Reagans and other officials for their contributions to the AIDS crisis. Produced off-Broadway in the fall of 1988, the play sustained disastrous reviews, but it has now been printed, complete with a self-righteous and self-pitying introduction that confuses artistic and political frustration.

Kramer's frustration is more than understandable. As he painstakingly chronicled in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, he was for years a very angry and very lonely voice in the wilderness of complacency. Art had to take a backseat to politics, even if *The Normal Heart* proved that the tragic facts of AIDS could make effective drama.

Coming after the *cri du coeur* of *The Normal Heart*, *Just Say No* seems totally inexplicable. Set in "Georgetown," the capital of "New Columbia," this exceptionally creaky play is set in motion when a video depicting the sexual antics of several high-ranking officials falls into the hands of "Foppy Schwartz." A gay fixture of conservative political society, Foppy realizes he must use the tape to blackmail his erstwhile friends, "Daddy" and Mrs. Potentate, into doing more about AIDS and gay rights in general. The rulers' ballet-dancing son and the mayor of "a large Northeastern city" pop out of their respective closets to complicate the proceedings, which are meant to expose how the

sexual hypocrisy of our leaders had made public policy a cruel farce.

One is left wondering what Kramer thought he was doing in this play. His disingenuous innuendo tells us nothing we didn't know already (one of Kramer's favorite gripes against the mainstream press), and his invocation of grand satiric tradition seems largely a blind to cover his own artistic shortcomings. He claims adopting theatrical mannerisms from Restoration comedy and elsewhere shielded him from libel laws, but this coyness seems odd from a man who relishes being famous for his outspokenness. The bows Kramer makes towards satiric predecessors are so heavyhanded that he winds up falling all over himself. It takes more than allusions to "the way of the world" or Lady Bracknell to revive the spirit of Congreve or Wilde, and tired puns on the word "head" do not amount to "heightened language" in the tradition of Shakespeare and Shaw.

If Kramer's play is itself an overextended *Saturday Night Live* skit, his introduction raises something far more disturbing than the possibility of boredom. Kramer has said that he doesn't mind being considered a "message queen" rather than an artist, but here he pleads the prerogatives of both "creativity" and political purpose to explain why he has been so terribly misunderstood. When he claims that his play was punished for trying to say "something," he contributes to the atmosphere which prevents his message from being heard.

Kramer's own fatuousness in believing that exposing scandal will change the world rivals that of the slogan that gives his play its name. But Kramer is guilty of far more than wishful thinking. By making the Reagans into caricatures, Kramer actually makes it harder to take their evil seriously. And by opting for the artificiality of farce, Kramer denies any responsibility for examining the motivations for Foppy Schwartz's conversion to political correctness.

Why should anyone care if Kramer chooses to lick his wounds this way? There are several reasons. It wounds Kramer's own cause to attribute his theatrical failure to some heterosexual plot, and by persevering down this particular blind alley, Kramer's energies are diverted from the kind of theater he has shown himself most adept at creating: the street theater of groups like ACT UP.

Dangerous moves

The Haunted House is as tight and fine as a poem, with phrases, lines and whole scenes that surge and resurface.

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

The Haunted House. By Rebecca Brown. The Seal Press: Seattle, 1990. 196 pages. \$8.95

"I'll fly, you navigate," my father'd say, and we'd careen through Kansas City in search of Red's Pit Bar-B-Que." The first line spoken by protagonist Robin Daley puts the reader in the front seat as she tools her way through the funny, wrenching surreal story of her father, her mother and her struggle to

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house herself outside their powerful influence.

"I'll fly, you navigate." And we are with her for the whole of the compelling ride.

The Haunted House, Rebecca Brown's first novel, was originally published in England, then issued in hardcover by Viking Press. With this paperback edition from Seattle's Seal Press, Brown's haunting, lyric voice will become accessible to many more readers.

And well it should. This novel is as tight and fine as a poem, with phrases, lines, whole scenes that surface and resurface, each time bringing with them a new shelf of meaning. Narrator Robin Daley speaks in a voice that is by turns sarcastic, funny, and tender, drawing readers into her struggle to understand her family's truths and its lies, the legacies parents leave to children.

In the meantime, she tells a fine tale. Robin's father, the focus of the first section, "The Drunken Pilot," cuts a figure like The Great Santini — a reckless, charming, cavalier, alcoholic military pilot. To escape, he drinks and flies; he teaches his daughter what it means to be a moving target, to seek freedom at the edge of danger.

She learns her lesson well. The family moves often, each time Dad is transferred, and Robin comes to value these leavings as chances to recreate her life, to begin again, to unburden herself of objects and memory.

When her mother, her brother and she prepare to move, "each night we'd sleep in lighter rooms," she says. "I imagined my closet shelves breathing clean, my dresser drawers dreaming of sunlight."

The first section of *The Haunted House* is written in fragments — memories, wishful dreams, descriptions of photographs. Her father's life, and its important impact on Robin's, unfolds not in chronological order but rather in a tightening spiral, dream coiled against fact, winding up to the tense, frightening conclusion.

Brown writes with a light, deft hand; her images powerful but never overwrought. When Robin's parents divorce, she writes that "That very night, the stars all moved. The

constellations lurched. My father's compass spun a thousand times. Cancer fought the Great Bear and the Dipper broke in two. The next day we all reckoned by a different set of marks."

The book's second section, "Mom, the Making of a Star," sheds light on Robin's mother and her surreal journey from military pilot's wife to dazzling movie actress. If her father's story demonstrates one way to wrench free of the past — the escape of flight and booze — then her mother's shows an alternate way out. She lies, and says she has forgotten.

Robin returns from several years of worldwide travel to find her mother utterly changed, calling herself by a different name, living in a mansion, surrounded by servants, denying she was ever married or the mother of children.

"There's only one way to beat them leaving you," she tells her daughter, and Robin begins to understand the fiction her mother has created. Rather than remember and feel the loss that memory implies, her mother has pasted together a new life, a new world which has no room for her past. She can't mourn what never existed.

Tension curls like charged wire through this section, as Robin realizes the extent of her mother's self-deception and becomes obsessed with jolting her back to the truth of their life together.

"I'll find you," she vows. "Yes, I'll be there, breathless, panting, waiting in your makeup room, your dressing room, your room, waiting to bring you back home. I'm on to you, dear Mom."

The book's final section belongs to Robin. She and her lover Carrie work to renovate their own house, a place in which Robin can finally settle down, rest easy.

But it is not easy. Haunted by her parents' legacy of lies and escape, her own memories of freedom and terrified falling, Robin can't inhabit her new house in peace. Something scrabbles under the floor boards at night. The walls crack. Bathroom tiles pop loose. Plaster rains from the ceilings.

The house refuses to let her forget. In the powerful final section, with the house falling apart, Robin and Carrie desperate to repair it, the questions raised by Robin's family close in with urgency. Can we choose what to pack with us and what to leave back? If we wrench ourselves free from the past, will we just fall crazily until death? How much remembering, how much memory of loss, can a person tolerate?

Brown may not answer these questions. But the way she explores them in this rich, eerie, satisfying book will haunt you long after the story ends.

The Haunted House should be available in local bookstores after March 15. Author Rebecca Brown will read from her work at Powell's on April 5.

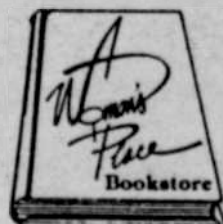
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