

# NORMAL HEART ATTACKS

Eleven years later, Larry Kramer's semi-autobiographical play still packs a punch

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.



PHOTO BY OWEN CAREY

Jacob Sidney and Louis A. Lotorto (above) in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*

Larry Kramer has been a headache to many, an embarrassment to others, yet is recognized by most as a choleric political leader who possesses the power to agitate change. His past efforts have been instrumental in forcing the media, the government and gay men, themselves, to acknowledge the threat of AIDS. Since the publication of his first book, *Faggots*, in 1978, Kramer has embroiled himself in controversy,

of Dr. Emma Brookner (Sarah Lucht), the sermon of celibacy is communicated to Ned Weeks (Louis A. Lotorto), a notoriously loud-mouthed writer and another panic-stricken gay man. Ned accepts the call to action and within a few months begins rallying gay men, the press, and Ben, his straight brother (Michael Fisher-Welsh), a partner in a big-league law firm. By the fifth scene, Ned has managed to gather a core of gay activists to raise money, including Felix (Jacob Sidney), his newly acquired boyfriend, whom he lobbied for press coverage at *The New York Times*. Mark Schwahn and Kevin Salter, in dynamic performances as two of the founding members of the GMHC, round out the supporting cast.

The emotional intensity of *The Normal Heart* is centered around Ned and his polemical raging. He labors to win his brother's support and approval and grapples with the perplexities that unfold in his relationship with Felix; his life is complicated further when he finds that he is shut out of the group that he worked so passionately to help form. Ned lives with a rage that threatens to swallow him up completely. He tenaciously defends his solely exercised political process of aggression, refusing to buckle to a more civilized, conformist approach adopted by the GMHC. It is this approach that Ned/Kramer recognizes as costing lives with every moment of inactivity. Kramer (in a "politics besieges the emotional development" scene) compares the political ineffectuality of the GMHC's establishmentarian techniques with that of the backdoor diplomacy of American Jews to end the Holocaust.

The strong cast works together under Jon Kretzu's thoughtful direction to deliver Kramer's impassioned message, which is as pertinent today as it was over a decade ago. *The Normal Heart's* position within the evolving genre of gay-themed theater is inarguably significant, as is Larry Kramer's invaluable contribution to a new era of gay-politicized theater with an indefatigable voice of insurgence impossible to ignore.

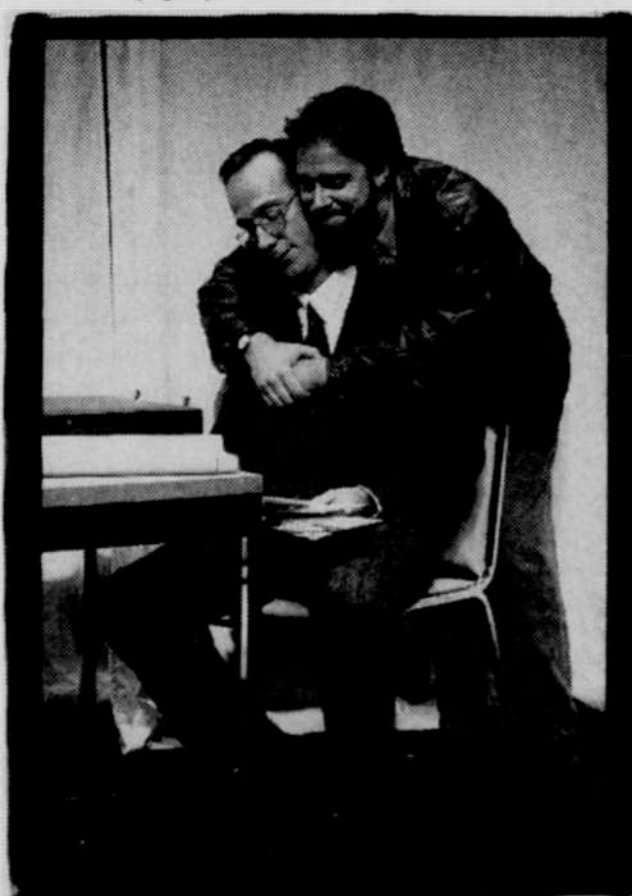


PHOTO BY OWEN CAREY

## Theater

conflict and a self-inflicted martyrdom, which in the '90s has established him as a gay and lesbian household word.

Artists Repertory Theater has established what it calls "The Larry Kramer Project," producing in rotating repertory, for the first time in theater history, Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*.

First produced in 1985, Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* was the first major play to deal with the subject of AIDS. However, unlike most of the AIDS plays that followed in its path, *The Normal Heart* is more of a history play than an AIDS drama. It is a chronicle of New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis—the initial organized response to the AIDS epidemic. It is also Larry Kramer's semi-autobiographical account of his personal struggles, including his eventual pariah status within the organization he helped found.

We first meet some of the characters in the play in a doctor's waiting area. It is 1981, and we quickly observe the fear that has spread through the lives of several gay men as they struggle to obtain an explanation of an unknown, deadly disease. In the examining room

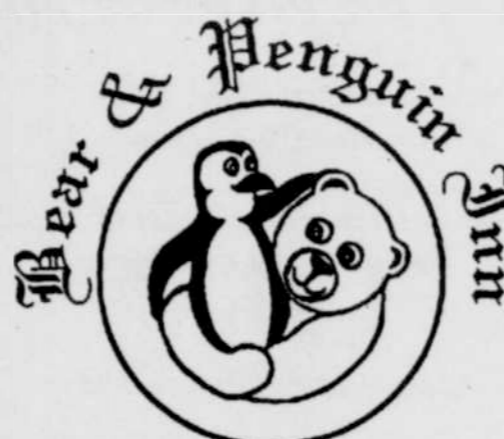
Michael Fisher-Welsh (left) and Louis A. Lotorto

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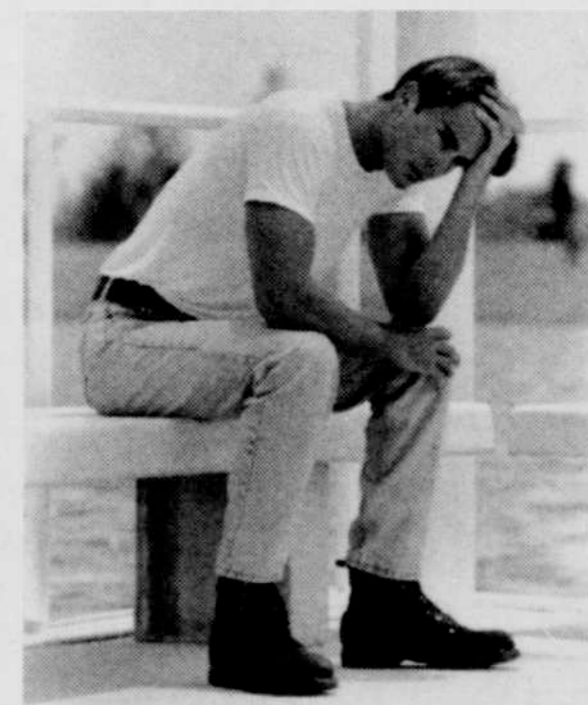
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