

DESTINY TURNS INWARD

The companion piece to *The Normal Heart* is enlivened by exceptional direction and cast

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.

THE DESTINY OF ME



Artists Repertory Theater should be applauded for its efforts in making theatrical history. The company is producing, for the first time in repertory, Larry Kramer's semi-autobiographical pair of AIDS-themed plays. *The Normal Heart* (reviewed in the June 7 issue) is a historical drama recounting the birth of New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis with particular emphasis on Kramer's role in its inception

Theater

and his eventual fall from grace. *Normal Heart's* companion piece, *The Destiny of Me*, veers away from the former play's simulated sociological historicity and heads directly into the turbulent territory of familial confessions. Although there is a measure of Kramer's

characteristic brand of politicized AIDS-drama within it, *Destiny of Me* is primarily theatrical catharsis—desperate projections of unreconciled grievances—masquerading as good ol' down-to-earth tragedy.

Destiny of Me is performed entirely within the walls of a hospital room. Ned Weeks has just checked into a hospital in hopes of undergoing experimental treatment to suppress the growth of the AIDS virus. The method has been discovered by a doctor and AIDS researcher who has repeatedly been the target of Ned's political diatribes. With years of anger, frustration and loss behind him, Ned is desperate to do whatever he can to bolster his hopes of staying alive.

Ned's hospital stay, with the possible aid of the drugs he is forced to take, induces memories of his childhood. The characters float in and out of Ned's illusory recollection of his past. Through the presence of Alexander Weeks (who represents the embodiment of Ned as a boy) we are privy to a series of unsettling scenes exposing

the inharmonious nature of the Weeks family dynamic. We become witness to an abusive father horrified by his son's exhibitions of flamboyance, and a mother who keeps herself occupied with her various volunteering missions. Ned's brother Benjamin—the only member of the family he completely trusts—persuades him to commit his sexual identity to the scrutiny of psychotherapy.

The audience is pummeled with a fragmented succession of disappointments and dampened expectations, which, strangely enough, seem to define the substance of most families. As we observe each painful enactment, we begin to see our role in the process as audience members translated into commiserating therapy participants. With each emotional turn, we can't help but be reminded of our own painful experience of life's cruelty and instability.

It is the exceptional cast and Jon Kretzu's smooth direction that redeem some of the tedious-

ness of the script and invigorate this production. Louis A. Lotorto and Michael Fisher-Welsh portray Ned and Ben Weeks in both *Normal Heart* and *Destiny of Me*. Their relationship is the most strongly developed among all of Kramer's characters and each actor executes a remarkable performance. Galen B. Schrick and Vana O'Brien turn in strong performances as Ned's parents. Gary Gunter competently portrays the young, angst-ridden Alexander Weeks, who suffers the abuses thrown at him as the advent of his sexuality materializes.

The Destiny of Me represents the playwright's desire to make sense of the senselessness that envelops his world. Written during a period of intense psychological reflection and contemplation, this play was Larry Kramer's attempt to join the legion of playwrights who felt compelled to, as he said, "find out what their lives have been all about." As you leave the theater, you will either leave with a portion of Kramer's unsolved existential riddle or a burning desire to comprehend what the last two-and-a-half hours were all about.

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