

INTERVIEW

Reaction readings

Theater artist Tim Miller questions author David Román about his history of the theatrical response to AIDS

BY TIM MILLER

Consider the images that hover over these last 15 years as our society has tried to deal with the enormity of the AIDS crisis: a darkened theater with an angel hanging over a PWA's bed, the public spectacles of mourning our losses and expressing our rage through the new rituals of memorials and ACT UP street theater, the memories of the many performances where artists helped people find a way through a very difficult time.

David Román has spent almost a decade researching and writing his book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS*, a riveting examination of how theater and performance responded to AIDS. From cabarets and candlelight vigils to edgy performance art and full-scale Broadway productions such as *Angels in America* and *Rent*, public performances and theatrical texts have shaped, and been shaped by, the unprecedented challenge of the AIDS crisis. An associate professor of English at the University of Southern California and co-editor with Holly Hughes of the forthcoming anthology of plays *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, Román has committed himself to making sure this inspiring story of how a gay culture created itself one day at a time is remembered and honored.

In *Acts of Intervention*, we see again and again the potential for theater to change, challenge and heal our lives. With an abiding respect and love for the creative acts made during a very difficult time in our history, David Román says, "I believe that performance really matters and makes a difference in our lives."

I first met Román in 1990 after a performance of mine at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. I was immediately impressed by his commitment and enthusiasm for the whole variety of queer theatrical and performance activity that was exploding as we entered the '90s. We have gone to the theater, to demonstrations and to memorials together in the years since—all clearly "acts of intervention" in these challenging times. We recently sat down at The Abbey, a cafe in West Hollywood, to talk about his remarkable book.

Acts of Intervention is the very first book to examine gay theater and AIDS. Tell me why you wrote this book and how it came about.

I wrote *Acts of Intervention* between 1990 and 1996; it came out of my involvement with ACT UP and other forms of AIDS activism.

I got my Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1990, shortly after your NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] funding crisis. Given that queer theater was under attack and that AIDS was decimating our communities, I felt compelled to focus my research on the important work that was happening in theaters and performance spaces across the country. I wanted to document and engage the ways that gay people were responding to the epidemic. I especially wanted to focus on the performing arts.

The book begins with the public performances of the early 1980s and proceeds historically. I end the book with a discussion of *Rent*, the celebrated musical, and the larger cultural climate surrounding AIDS in the summer of 1996.

I have my own memories as a young gay man in the early '80s devouring the theater and performance that was addressing AIDS. What was your personal investment in these theater pieces and community events that gathered people together? Did you look to theater's response to the crisis as a way of understanding your own confusions and fears around AIDS?

Communal gatherings were—and still are—

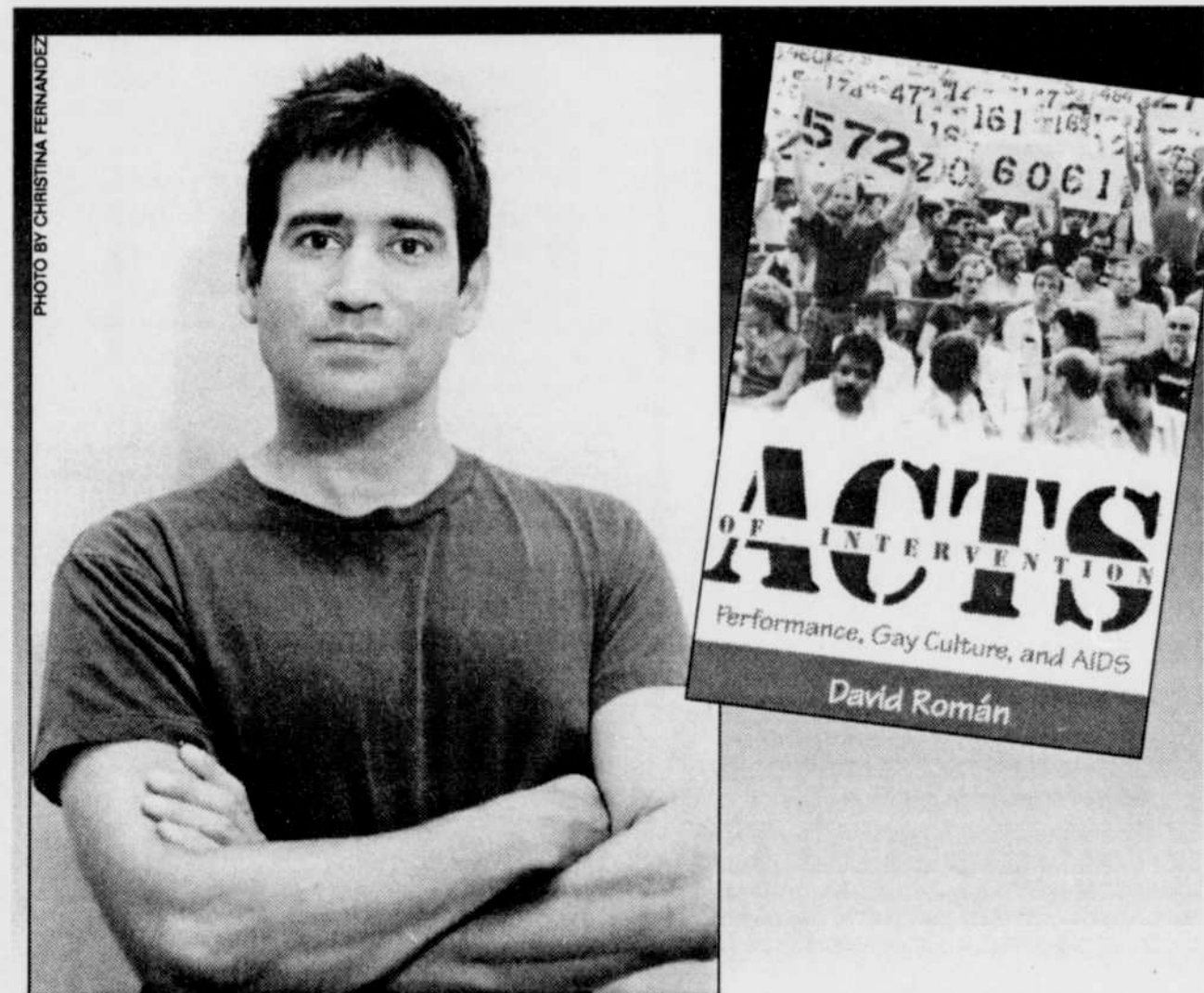
crucial events in helping us make sense of AIDS, whether it's seeing a play, participating in a candlelight vigil, or attending a fundraiser.

I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, up until 1987. I didn't get to see some of the earliest work happening on the coasts. What this meant for many of us in these other cities outside the major queer urban centers, was that we had to create our own representations, we had

set out to be great works of art. The goals of AIDS activist art are all about helping us come up with ways to best confront AIDS.

As I read *Acts of Intervention*, I was struck by what a huge and compelling story this is, the response of performing artists to this new crisis in our midst.

The book casts a wide net—I look at mainstream, alternative and community-based per-



David Román

to work within the local politics, resources, and needs of our communities.

I was active in Madison AIDS Support Network, organizing many of their earliest fund-raisers. I put together an evening of performance at a bar where I was working at the time, the Cardinal Bar, where local dancers, singers and drag performers from the community entertained the audience. We raised about \$500, more than any other benefit at the time. While we didn't make much money, the event provided many of us in the community an opportunity to come together and support one another.

The University [of Wisconsin-Madison] production of *The Normal Heart* a few years later was another galvanizing event for us. We used this opportunity to use the university's resources to help us get the word out. Our efforts in Madison were not unique or exceptional; queer people across the country were organizing these kinds of events throughout the 1980s.

I actually got involved in AIDS work through the movie *Buddies*, which I saw in 1985. While I didn't think the movie was such a great film, it had a profound impact on me and got me to volunteer for the local grassroots AIDS group. *Buddies* taught me two things: first, on a more personal level, that I could do something to help people with AIDS—I didn't need to be a doctor or a social worker; second, that community-based art provides a unique service to queer people. AIDS films, performances and plays don't necessarily

performances in cities from San Francisco to New York—but it is by no means an encyclopedia of AIDS theater. I discuss major plays such as *The Normal Heart*, *Angels in America* and *Jeffrey*, but I also consider lots of forgotten performances that I've uncovered through my research.

What were some of the surprises you found in writing this book?

Perhaps the most significant historical contributions my book offers is that it challenges two pretty solid myths about AIDS theater and activism. The first is the idea that there was no direct AIDS activism before the arrival of ACT UP in 1987, and the second myth is that *The Normal Heart* and *As Is* were the first AIDS plays.

My book uncovers and records various public AIDS demonstrations and protests throughout the country. In cities ranging from Houston, Chicago, Atlanta and Seattle—cities that weren't epicenters of AIDS such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles—a viable AIDS activism was part of the immediate response to AIDS. This was also true for the cities hit the hardest by AIDS.

Acts of Intervention is unusual in that it focuses on works produced throughout the country and not just the New York theater scene.

I've lived in a number of different cities since the 1980s: Madison, Chicago, the Twin Cities, Los Angeles, Seattle, Philadelphia and New York City. In each of these cities I wit-

nessed an enormous output of support from the gay community in response to AIDS. I was also directly involved in various AIDS service organizations or activist groups in these cities.

Performance was a critical component in these efforts to intervene in the AIDS crisis. AIDS performance happens everywhere, not just in New York City. I know this because often I was there to see it.

How were you able to research some of these performances around the country?

Thanks to the gay and lesbian press, I was able to read about many of the performances I didn't see or wasn't even aware of, in reviews or profiles in community newspapers. Various artists opened up their personal archives to me, sometimes leaving me the only copies of their work. Gay and lesbian community archives, such as Philadelphia's Penguin Place and AIDS Information Library, were extremely helpful.

I was also interested from the start in placing AIDS performance in a national context, looking at the various types of theater and performance pieces diverse communities organized in response to AIDS.

Acts of Intervention isn't simply drama criticism, it tells a story about the gay community's response to AIDS and the story of how we have adjusted our lives throughout these past years.

The book doesn't dwell on interpretations of AIDS plays in the more traditional sense of drama criticism. I found that to truly honor the work I needed to come up with a different way of thinking about AIDS performance than simply claiming it was well-written or -performed, or that it wasn't. Instead, I consider the context of the performance. What does this play or performance tell us about our understanding of AIDS in this particular historical moment?

Other issues also seemed more pertinent to me than questions of artistic merit. What were the kinds of performances emerging out of queer communities of color? What are we to make of the proliferation of AIDS comedies such as *Jeffrey* or *Love! Valour! Compassion!* in the 1990s? How are HIV-negative gay men represented in gay theater?

The response of theater artists to the AIDS crisis has been one of the real testing grounds to see if theater can powerfully affect our lives. What conclusions do you make as you look at this rich history recounted in Acts of Intervention?

Throughout the book I am interested in exploring the ways that performance shapes our understanding of AIDS. The book takes a proactive approach to theater. In other words, I believe that performance really matters and makes a difference in our lives. Theater holds the potential to galvanize us into new forms of consciousness.

The book documents the unique resilience of gay culture in the midst of difficult and harrowing times. Writing this book has been my own contribution to this resilience, my own personal tribute to the tremendous generosity of gay people during the last two decades.

■ ACTS OF INTERVENTION: PERFORMANCE, GAY CULTURE AND AIDS by David Román. Indiana University Press, 1998; \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

TIM MILLER is a solo performer whose full-evening theater works have been presented all over the world. He is the artistic director of Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, Calif., and he teaches at California State University, Los Angeles, and University of California Los Angeles. His book *Shirts & Skin* is currently available from Alyson Publications.