

Death and Desire: The Evolution of the AIDS Play

Noreen Barnes-McLain

When we meet those who are not to live long, we are only conscious of the fate that is hanging over them, we see nothing else . . . they do all in their power to mislead us; they imagine that their eager smile, their burning interest in life will conceal the truth . . .

—Maurice Maeterlinck, “The Pre-Destined,” *The Treasure of the Humble*

The list of my personal losses grows longer every year. I think of my close friends who have died—many in theatre, a few writers and artists. Most were young, with promising careers ahead of them. AIDS has cut a swath through the visual and performing arts in particular; its devastating impact on the culture is measured “in memory of”—a poem, performance piece, quilt panel or quietly planted tree. It is, in 1997, the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 19 and 44. At monthly board meetings for an AIDS service organization, I look around at the faces of new friends; some of whom are HIV-positive. How they deal with their condition is instructive to the rest of us; how HIV-positive and AIDS-afflicted characters respond to illness has been the subject of dozens of dramas for well over a decade. This essay looks specifically at the issue of death and dying in what have become known as “AIDS plays,” primarily by and about American gay white men. The limitations of space make this observation a necessarily cursory one; I am omitting mention of many important works, but my focus is on my view of second—and, I propose, third—wave American dramatic works about AIDS.

At the turn of the millennium, at the end of a century, human faith is questioned and the supernatural returns once again to engage us. As with the *fin de siècle* obsessions evinced in the works of Munch or Strindberg, the ghostly and the undead haunt us. On stage, they visit dying protagonists to ease them in their

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transition to the next plane of existence. The angel and the vampire have become our guides to the world beyond—as the wild popularity of both icons in the 1990s testifies—Anne Rice’s best-selling and homoerotic vampire chronicles have revived the age-old conflation of the sexual and the terminal, while earnest angels fill the television and film screens and their images are commodified on cards and tee-shirts. These contrary emissaries, both embodiments of eternal life, offer comfort and the promise of salvation in the “age of AIDS.” The best-known presence of an heavenly spirit is perhaps in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, often mistaken as a work solely about AIDS, but referred to by him in the notes of an Eureka Theatre Company staged reading during his early wrestling with the epic scope of the work as a play concerning “paralysis and change” (1990). The crisis of the blood supply may be a metaphor for spiritual crises, and AIDS itself has been regarded as a metaphor for a melange of the culture’s dis/eases. How does one battle a deadly disease and remain aggressively positive about sex and sexuality in dramatic expression?

Many playwrights have tackled the stories of those with AIDS, as they have lost friends, lovers, or they themselves have become infected, and others join with them to keep the stories alive through theatrical productions of their works. There has been an unfortunate conflation of the “gay play” with the “AIDS play,” because so many of the first plays about AIDS emerged from the gay community, which had initially been the hardest hit (and is only now seeing a decrease in the number of deaths from AIDS). Plays with gay characters in the ’90s, whether or not they directly concern AIDS, most often offer at least a brief discussion of the topic; to not acknowledge it would be perceived as lacking credibility. As a strategy for bypassing the current reality of the disease, many writers have historicized gay material, setting their works in the pre-1980s era. This historicization has been coupled with allegorization, as epidemics, plagues and quarantines have become the obvious historical analogs for the contemporary crisis.

Sex and Death: Twin Taboos

How is death, the ultimate drama, performed on stage? There is a display of the body, often situated on a bed as the site of the intersection of death and desire. Drapes of cold and clean hospital white simultaneously shield and reveal the body. In the premiere of Robert Pitman’s frequently overlooked *Passing*, in 1989, director Kelly Hill staged the play to imply that everything was seen from how the protagonist, Pony, would be viewing the world in his last days. As Wendell Ricketts notes, “Thus the bed is a large, plush, womblike construction; the hospital drapes are yards of gauzy swirls that play constant tricks with light.” As other characters enter and exit his room, there is a “bright flash

that signals every opening of the door" (26). The title of the work suggests the process of dying, its action, movement, the notion of transition.

Culturally, it is with great difficulty that we are learning to incorporate the process of death into our lives. It is one of the more arduous lessons that AIDS and a rash of toxically-catalyzed cancers have taught us. Michael Bronski, in "Death and the Erotic Imagination," asserts that "gay people must learn to face the reality of death with the same energy and imagination we have put into claiming and enjoying our sexual desires and experiences . . . If death—like sex—remains taboo, clouded behind moralisms, abstractions, sentimentality, fear and inadequate notions of politics, we will not be able to claim it as another aspect of our openly gay lives" (228).

David Roman addresses the performance of the death of characters with AIDS in recent theatrical production in his essay, "Performing All Our Lives: AIDS, Performance Community." In his discussion of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, Roman notes that the play contains a "traditional closure typical of realist theatre death. Realist drama is so imbedded in the prevailing ideology of naturalized heterosexuality in dominant culture that it offers no representational position for gay men or lesbians which is not marginal or a site of defeat" (210). More recent works of the gay/lesbian theatre have countered this by offering a fusion of forms, a blending of genres, to challenge the death-sentence of realism—what I have called, in a previous essay, "a movement (with apologies to Grotowski) towards a queer theatre" (1990).

Although Kramer's powerful and angry work is the best-known of the early AIDS plays, several others claim position as the first either written or produced which deal with the subject, including Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat*. Chesley, best-known for *Jerker*, embodied the playwright as PWA (Person with AIDS) and PWA as playwright at its most fascinating study in terms of the relationship of the individual to his/her formulation of public artistic expression—which dominates the self-identity? The work becomes about the condition of life, which, in turn, determines the nature of the work. For many writers, their work must not only be openly gay, but it also becomes about living with AIDS, as they themselves frequently are. It is a form of AIDS activism, a critical expression about that which has the most profound impact on their existence. (This also has an impact on the performer as well. Many find refuge in role playing is also critical as a survival technique to many people; for the actor with HIV, the transitory nature of the theatre becomes the more poignant when he or she undertakes the role of a character with AIDS). Chesley remained bracingly sex- (and radical sex) positive throughout his playwriting, even battling (quite literally, armed with tomatoes) what he perceived as the revival of

damaging images of gays on the stage when a production of *Boys in the Band* was mounted at San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros.

At "Rhino," the oldest gay and lesbian theatre company in the country, AIDS has been the central subject of what developed into a cycle of works over a decade of production. These include the ground-breaking modular piece of ensemble educational theatre, *The AIDS Show* (Artists Involved with Death and Survival), also credited with being the first "AIDS play" in 1984, and *Unfinished Business*, works conceived by Leland Moss and performed across the country in churches, schools and hospitals; Anthony Bruno's *Soul Survivor*, a gay homage to Coward's *Blithe Spirit*; Robert Pitman's *Passing*, a moving interior study of a man facing death, and the bedside vigil of family, friends and an imaginary companion; Joel Ensana's *Roy*, a closer look at the famous homophobic homosexual unable to acknowledge his sexuality and illness; and Associate Artistic Director Doug Holsclaw's plays, ranging from the long-running hit, *Life of the Party*, to the black comedy, *The Baddest of Boys*. These plays have chronicled the changes in the response to, and the challenges of living with, the disease, and have been some of the company's best-known works. As the epidemic was about to embark on its second decade, Holsclaw was among the first playwrights willing to relinquish the sentiment of the early AIDS plays and bravely turn the corner onto a fresh perspective, one which focused on the reality of coming to terms with the fact of the disease.

The Second Generation

In her introduction to *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances*, Therese Jones cites my (and another critic's) assertion that Holsclaw's play was the first of a second wave of dramatic works about AIDS (in a 1992 review of *The Baddest of Boys*, xi). She examines this and subsequent works in terms of their possession of two central characteristics: a multiplicity of characters and perspectives about the AIDS crisis and a "fearless and festive" tone (xii). Perry, the dying owner of a trendy cafe is represented by a grotesque and enormous head; each of the workers at the restaurant visit him with prayers, puns or appeals: a waiter offers him a choice of suicide options in the framework of menu specials, a chef pleads for the secret ingredient for his chili recipe, while his co-owner works on a performance piece about fashionable funerals. The sheer audacity of the work, the ever-growing head of Perry, the medical absurdities, the appearance of the face of Jesus emerging from the lesions on his chest, render the work a significant bridge to a group of works in which anger and activism are tempered by substantial amounts of buffoonery.

The musical may seem to be an unlikely form for the topic of AIDS, but several works have proven effective. In Henry Mach and Paul Katz's *Dirty*

Dreams of a Clean-Cut Kid, a group of men wait for the results of their HIV tests, express their fears about the future, while the work maintains a sex-positive message. Jones, Stanley and Berg's *AIDS! The Musical* includes a sequence, "AIDS! The Game Show!," a wicked parody determining, in *Wheel of Fortune* format, which contestant will receive a cure, live as a "diseased pariah" or die. (The HIV-positive community has seized the image of the terminally-ill outcast and refashioned it into a satiric expression in such publications as *Diseased Pariah News*).

The shift in focus in this second generation of theatre pieces was to that concerning the *quality* of time spent while living. As in the first wave of works, there is no question of whether one will die, and how one meets one's death is still the central action of the play. As with *The Normal Heart*, William Hoffman's bittersweet *As Is*, received a critically acclaimed Broadway run, and was also significant in changing form, breaking realistic style and employing a great deal of humor. As a work created in the mid-1980s, in the years when the first AIDS symptoms appeared and few drug treatments were available, it was an examination of coming to terms with a fairly swift death. Many AIDS plays are very specifically tied to time, filled with topical references, from politicians in office to the drug *du jour*. However, the style in which the topic is addressed changes, opens up into elements of the fantastic and farcical as playwrights offered a response to the absurdity of the crisis—life-affirming laughter. Paula



Queen of Angels by Theatre Rhinoceros with Mario Mondelli, Timothy Flanagan (below) and Mart McChesney and David Bicha (above) (photo courtesy of Theatre Rhinoceros)

Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* inverts our expectations by employing a metaphor of another disease (acquired from toilet seats) for AIDS. It focuses, in both funny and moving encounters, on the relationship between a brother and sister; it is the playwright's own elegy to a lost loved one, and thus it transcends what it frequently perceived to be the "preaching to the converted" of which many AIDS plays have been accused.

Some pieces transcend time and place, even while containing particular allusions. It is the element of fantasy, particularly in terms of the ability of characters to travel in time and space, that frees them from a confining topicality that limits both accessibility and production of the work. Some playwrights employ characters who return to haunt, tease and torment the living, whether those spirits are cheerful or pernicious. Reluctant heroes undertake arduous journeys of self-discovery, such as the poet Max's trip to the underworld in James Carroll Pickett's *Queen of Angels*, perhaps best summed up by its subtitle, "a tragical comedy or comical tragedy full of intrigue and plenty of dancing. angry scenes! deceptions! songs! and arousals of love! demons that fly across the stage with a chorus of naked queers!" In this medieval carnival retelling of the Gilgamesh/Orpheus myth, a man with dementia journeys to hell to find his lost lover, encounters the caustic Queen of Angels, a gaggle of gay clowns, and a Punch and Judy parable. The intelligence, wit and highly charged emotion of this work theatricalizes gay rage at institutional neglect and the fraud of social homophobia.

In 1986, Pickett was a founder, with Kearns, of Artists Confronting AIDS (ACA), with the intent to examine the relationship of the arts to the AIDS crisis. ACA also produced *Positive Women: Love Against AIDS*, performed by women living with AIDS. Its docudramatic format was based on the successful two-part AIDS/US: Portraits in Personal Courage, scripted by Pickett, which was produced in the late 1980s in Los Angeles. As Pickett's epic adventure demonstrated, the scripts produced by playwrights with AIDS often anticipate their responses to their deaths with astonishing accuracy. To have listened to Pickett's eloquent anger, to see Michael Kearns' magnificent performances of sadness, humor and rage, in *intimacies*, *more intimacies*, *Rock*, the range of characters in his volume of monologues, *T-cells and Sympathy*, as well as his gay version of the Cyrano story, *Myron, A Fairy Tale in Black and White*, to witness Kelly Hill's powerful productions, or have delighted in the fantastic designs of Jim Ponder's was—and still is—the experience of visions of artists who have been—and still are—giving the performances of their lives.

Joe Pintauro's *Raft of the Medusa* is unusual in its assembly of a cross-section of people with HIV and AIDS in a support-group setting. The characters range in age, race, class, gender and sexuality. An increasing number of works

deal with African-American or Hispanic gay men or an occasional woman with HIV/AIDS, and some have represented the support-group in isolated scenes in plays (Victor Bumbalo's *What Are Tuesdays Like?* reveals the relations of a small group of strangers in a waiting room for outpatient treatment), but none has collected such a large and diverse group of characters on the stage for such a sustained course of action. Like the people depicted in Gericault's painting of the same name, Pintauro's ensemble of characters are adrift, clinging desperately to the hope offered by an alphabet soup of drugs and untested cures. The raft itself is a clear metaphor for the HIV-positive community—marginalized, stigmatized. Those with HIV are the “common sailors”—not heroes in our conventional notion of them. But in a necessary revision of human dignity and values, those who have historically been “outsiders” are heroes nonetheless, who daily battle a plague of spirit that has infected all of us (1993; n.p.).

Other forms of responses to the enormous losses to AIDS are manifested in stands against death with a dance (or scream) of life, powerfully addressed in the performance work of Tim Miller's *My Queer Body*, Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* (a choreographed celebration of the lives of those with a range of terminal and chronic illnesses, including AIDS and cancer) and the mesmerizing, three and a half octave range of *Plague Mass*, performed by Diamanda Galas.

The second generation of AIDS works have rebelled against realism, and assumed the forms of farce, surrealism and the fantastic in tackling the theme of living with and dying of AIDS. And beyond? Perhaps there is a third wave, that has assumed a much more positive outlook, which we witness (in part) with characters such as Jeffrey, the title character in Paul Rudnick's comic view of negotiating gay sexuality in the 1990s, and Buzz in Terrance McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* The AIDS “issue” has been incorporated as one given circumstance among many, just as we have moved past the era of “coming out” plays to those in which the sexuality of the characters is an already established factor to be moved beyond. In a time without a major war, AIDS has taught us about the experience of death at an early age. It has had enormous personal and political consequences. This multifaceted disease has transformed social and sexual behaviors, as well as the very discourse of morality and its concomitant determination of agency, innocence, scapegoating and victimization. And at present, the face of death, at least for a few, is less of an immediate specter, as protease “cocktails” offer hope of longer and healthier lives to those who were making what they thought would be the final preparations to die. Although it is premature to claim that a corner has been turned in the battle against AIDS, the glimmer of hope has grown brighter. And there are still many more stories to tell, more lessons to be learned about living with chronic illness, and receiving death.

Langdon Hammer, in "Art, Sex, and Illness: or, How Can Culture Cure You?," writes that "what esthetic experience does is break down the boundary between people on stage and in the audience, between people who suffer and those who observe them. Art, in this specific sense, communicates AIDS" (11). The aboriginal, therapeutic function of theatre is evident in these plays, and as many of them demonstrate, the attitude with which the protagonists confront the approach of death, and face the inevitable, in turn determines the spectator's reception of the writer's message. Will it be with grace and acceptance, anger and denial, or a belly laugh and an aggressive embrace?

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