Katie Morris

THT 364

The Changing Motivations of AIDS Performance

Few social issues or historical events can claim the impact HIV/AIDS has had on the contemporary Western theatre community. Through both the loss of creative talent and the creation of performances addressing the disease, the theatre is in a unique position of being the site of both overwhelming devastation and potential political action, with the New York theatre community in particular responding quickly and forcefully to the rising epidemic. Though a great deal of the early history of what is now known as “AIDS performance” has been lost due to the deaths of those involved in its production, artists working in the early stages of the AIDS crisis sought to create works that would both educate and entertain, to both galvanize and heal in an effort to fight the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS. With present advancements in HIV/AIDS treatments and a changing social understanding of the disease, it is unclear to both artists and audiences what AIDS performance should be attempting to accomplish in this “post-AIDS” period. Is the role of the AIDS artist still to educate and provoke political action, or is that no longer necessary? Does the gay and lesbian community still need theatre to serve as a site for community-building and identity-affirmation?

Evident in the fact that As Is and The Normal Heart are often considered the first theatrical responses to AIDS, the history of AIDS performance has often been rewritten to neglect the importance of earlier efforts that took the form of benefits, fundraisers, and memorials. Even before the 1981 New York Times report on the “rare cancer seen in homosexuals,” the theatre community had already been confronting HIV/AIDS through performance in an effort to intervene in what they were able to recognize as a health crisis long before governmental institutions or the general public. So many of these individual performances
left no record and are now forgotten because of the nature of the production of these early works; they were community-based and hastily produced in order to meet the urgent and immediate need for action, “based upon the belief in the social role of the arts in promoting change” (*Acts* 9). The lack of any documentation surrounding these performances suggests that those involved were not yet aware of the eventual overwhelming scope of AIDS and that their performances were not created within conventional artistic and theatrical systems. Some of them were perhaps not even intended to be taken as artistic entities of their own, instead meaning to serve as one component of many in a single act of intervention. For example, gay friendly bars, restaurants, and art galleries in New York hosted fundraisers featuring solo performance pieces addressing AIDS as early as 1981, their efforts serving to encourage attendance and donations rather than to serve and artistic purpose. In one early fundraiser, singer Karen Akers told the audience, “We have to raise money, and we have to raise it now before more people are lost” (*Acts* 13). As stars of Broadway shows began to lend their talents in greater numbers to these performances, either creating original performances or recreating the ones for which they were famous, they “began to articulate a theatrical response to AIDS that, while stemming from a small but expanding circle of New Yorkers in the theatre and performing arts, amplified the AIDS consciousness necessary to educate gay male New Yorkers and generate money for research” (*Acts* 13).

The first scripted dramatic works dealing with HIV/AIDS arose out of community-based activism and were performed in city markets not considered as central to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as New York or San Francisco. *One*, an extended monologue written by Jeff Hagedorn in 1983 (still two years before the New York premieres of *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*), was originally written to be performed at an AIDS benefit in Chicago, and later found success in San Antonio, New Orleans, St. Louis, and other major cities as a fundraiser for local AIDS activist
organizations. It was possibly the first conventional theatre piece addressing HIV/AIDS, with Hagedorn finding his motivation in the misrepresentations of people with AIDS in the media: "Everything I was reading seemed to ignore the fact that these patients were people, seemed to imply the moment they acquired this disease they became less than human...Theatre, an emotional medium, is the best for dealing with these irrational reactions, for demystifying these prejudices" (Acts 47). His play, successful in cities across America, forced communities outside the perceived "risk group" to confront the disease and accept its perpetuation beyond gay male New Yorkers. It also had a broader effect in challenging the conventional theatre to acknowledge AIDS and present it on the mainstream New York stage.

The first major New York productions to find conventional success in depicting AIDS were William Hoffman’s As Is and Larry Kramer’s The Normal Heart. Though they were not the first theatrical responses to AIDS (as is frequently claimed), they were significant in the history of AIDS performance for multiple reasons: each was first produced in 1985 in noteworthy New York theatres (The Normal Heart at the Public Theatre and As Is on Broadway), reviewed in national publications such as the New York Times, and were praised for “introducing” AIDS performance, illustrating the ignorance and lack of recognition of earlier performances by a largely disinterested and seemingly unaffected public. Every critic reviewing these plays mentioned the death toll of the disease at that time (Shatzky 131) in a strangely apologetic manner, as if they felt the need to legitimize the fact that they were paying attention to AIDS performance at all. Despite the recognition of these plays as watershed moments of AIDS performance, the critics inadvertently reflected the ambivalence toward the disease within their reviews.
Because they shared these landmarks in the history of AIDS performance, and because of their wholly different dramatic approaches, these plays are often seen as setting up a binary into which all subsequent AIDS performances would place themselves: rage vs. remembrance, or personal reaction vs. public outrage. Modern theatre historians view *As Is* as the first of the “remembrance” model of AIDS performance, with the focus on not only remembering those who have died, but an entire way of life that had been lost with the onset of AIDS. Despite widespread discrimination and homophobia, pre-AIDS society is viewed nostalgically in these plays as a beautiful utopia of gay life, the loss of which is mourned as much as the loss of life. The play is often characterized as a more “human” drama, attempting to elicit sympathy for people with AIDS through the depiction of the suffering and struggles of not only those with the disease, but of their friends, family, healthcare providers, and a wider cross section of Americans (Shatzky 135). Though this was an effective strategy of intervention, its reliance on portraying the effects of AIDS on “normal” people implies a feeling on Hoffman’s part that sympathy for a gay man with AIDS would not be enough to motivate anyone considered outside of the risk group to any kind of change in their understanding of the disease, let alone inspire political action.

*The Normal Heart* represents the seeming other side of AIDS performance, that of rage over the absence of political intervention in the early stages of the disease, lack of public interest or concern, and the senseless deaths that resulted. Kramer’s autobiographical drama features a “rhetoric of accusation” that alienated some audience members, both gay and straight, but was generally found to be dramatically effective (Shatzky 135). His gay male characters were depicted as having “normal hearts” rather than as stereotypically “sex-driven monsters,” though he often relied on those same stereotypes as a source of blame for the spread of the disease; at
one point, for example, his protagonist chastises gay men for their promiscuity and says they should have been focusing on gaining marriage rights instead (Lawson 142). However polarizing his play may have been, polls taken by the producers revealed that the majority of the audience members were there because they wanted to learn more about AIDS and thought theatre — and this drama in particular — was a site for acquiring accurate information (143).

Shatzky and Lawson see imagine a distinct binary between the emotional responses reflected in these two plays due to the tendency of marginalized groups to respond either through “the impulse to humanize themselves so that others can understand them” or “the contrasting desire to indict those whom they feel are the cause of their suffering” (Shatzky 137). While these are common responses to oppression, it does not follow that they are mutually exclusive or necessarily in opposition to each other. This reductive view closes the door on the idea of complex and profound AIDS performance whose characters could possibly be experiencing a variety of emotional responses to the disease, thereby shaping the way audience members view the appropriate emotional responses in their real lives. Both models accomplish the activists’ goals of educating and galvanizing a community and stem from the same drive to “attempt to intervene in a dominant AIDS ideology as it takes shape and is sustained,” (Acts 210) and should be viewed as complementary to each other, rather than as two points of a binary opposition.

The AIDS performance of the eighties and early nineties was created to respond to an immediate need felt by artists to respond to the disease by creating a space for education and financial and political support. The rising death toll from AIDS caused a cultural urgency that helped spark the production of AIDS performance across multiple genres, from conventional drama to dance to performance art. The nature of AIDS performance changed, however, with the announcement at the 1996 International AIDS Conference in Vancouver of new treatments being
developed (despite the lack of public access to them), leading to a new cultural understanding of AIDS that has not yet been challenged significantly by the theatre: that the AIDS crisis is now "over" (Campbell 196). Despite the fact that over 40,000 new HIV diagnoses are made each year and over one million people are living with HIV/AIDS in the United States ("Centers for Disease Control and Prevention"), marriage equality and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" have become the primary concerns of mainstream gay and lesbian activism, and donations to AIDS research has decreased despite an overall increase in charitable donations. Though performance was used as a tool of intervention in the early stages of the disease, the normalization of AIDS now coincides with a normalization of gay and lesbian culture that rejects representations of what Alyson Campbell terms "undesirable queers." According to Campbell, the most important aspect of queer representation has become normality, serving to sanitize the full diversity of queer experience and merely reproduce heteronormative behavior using gay characters (197).

While it was deemed necessary at one time to "break the assumed link" between gay men and AIDS because of the resultant discrimination and homophobia, the continued distancing of AIDS from queer representations has begun to cause a kind of cultural amnesia surrounding AIDS, which can also be partially attributed to the popularity and subsequent commercialization of conventional examples of AIDS performance. In the case of Rent, one of the most successful AIDS plays, four of the main characters have AIDS; the disease shapes and informs every part of the play, but attention is not drawn to the disease itself. AIDS just "is," becoming so pervasive that it is no longer a subject of notice (Acts 275). While seeming to draw attention to AIDS, Rent simultaneously contributes to the "banalization" of the disease. However, through its creation of sympathetic, complex characters and depiction of memorials and support groups, the original
sites of AIDS performance, *Rent* also provides the "communal energy available to resist" this normalization (*Acts* 275).

HIV-positive artists who devoted the majority of their performances to AIDS during the "AIDS as crisis" period are unsure how to continue to represent AIDS on stage now that AIDS is "over." Because the necessary political change is widely regarded as completed, because the public is now "aware," "post"-AIDS performance is often dismissed as "preaching to the converted." Assumptions are made regarding the homogeneous make-up of the audience and the political motivations of the performer, causing the resulting performance to be dismissed as unnecessary or lacking in artistic value by more conservative critics ("Preaching" 2). This trivialization generally disregards the many other reasons people attend performances; in the specific case of the queer community, it implies that queer audiences have gained all the political rights they could possibly want, that homophobia no longer exists, and that there is no longer a need to use theatre to affirm identity or build community (*Preaching* 5), two causes that have become the primary goals of contemporary post-AIDS performance.

Neil Greenberg, a choreographer who puts his own HIV-positive status at the center of his performances, uses his new work to address the continuing challenges of living with HIV. He frequently interpolates sections of his old work into his new works as a way to reflect on the physical progress of his infection as well as his artistic growth. In *Part Three*, he describes his ever-evolving relationship with HIV and our own cultural understanding of AIDS as merely a chronic illness; for example, he highlights yet downplays the fact that he lost three weeks of rehearsal time due to a small cold that exacerbated by his compromised immune system ("Not-About-AIDS" 22). In his play *Bison*, Lachlan Phillpott critiques normalized queer representations, instead creating characters that are "imperfect, multiple, conflicted, and
endlessly shifting” (Campbell 208). Campbell sees in homonormalization an attempt to offer a “solution” to AIDS, that of the monogamous, marriage and family-minded white gay male (208). Phillpott offers no easy solutions, attempting in his work to “re-gay” AIDS through representations of diversity within the shared queer identity (209). Tim Miller uses his work to examine issues he sees as common within the queer community that are not frequently represented in mainstream Western society; in one piece, he explores the nature of sexual intimacy between two men, one HIV+ and one HIV-, hoping to “convert our private and communal fears into a courage to connect with each other, to convert the anxieties we face in these troubled times into a deep commitment to face the challenges in our daily lives” (Preaching 8). In his one man shows, Michael Kearns discusses his difficulties in staging AIDS and his newfound “dinosaur status” after over a decade of AIDS performances from the beginning of the epidemic. While he confesses to being unsure if his performances retain their usefulness for others, he emphasizes that “what is not in question is my determined desire to find something new to say about this histrionic disease; to express my extended anxiety; to give it my spin” (Kearns 223).

Although there is a continuing trend to place AIDS performances strictly into the categories of rage or remembrance, it serves artists and play-goers better to view them on a continuum; recognizing a wide spectrum of emotional responses during both the development and production of AIDS performances allows for a more forceful effect on audiences. The work of AIDS performance now must be to depict the continuing challenges of people living with HIV/AIDS in order to prevent younger generations, those most likely to both disregard the disease and to become infected, from perpetuating the contradiction of believing AIDS to be both “over” and ubiquitous to the point of meaninglessness.
Bibliography


