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ESSAY

And the band played on, but to a new beat

AIDS at a nexus: The plague enters the panorama of history, but the up-close and personal survives

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

The recent past, somewhere 25 or 30 years ago, is becoming History. A jumble of chaotic and competing impressions is being thinned out, given order and apparent causality, until it feels more distant than recent memory, more intriguing and coherent. The ordinary and invisible details of life, hemlines, hats and hairstyles, become palpably odd as the near past undergoes the process whereby it becomes, as one British novelist has written, "a foreign country."

The forging of history has been advancing through the darkest years of the AIDS crisis, through the 1980s when the disease was new, dimly understood and widely terrifying, into the 1990s in which the plague spread and decimated a generation of gay men before the introduction of powerful new drugs in 1995. A revival of a classic play about the early days of the AIDS crisis, new documentaries that tell the history of AIDS activism, a continuing engagement by artists and curators with cultural responses to AIDS and, of course, anniversaries — including last year's 30th anniversary of the emergence of the disease — have kept the visceral story of AIDS before the public, even as it has become a chronic or manageable disease.

Yet something is changing. Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart," which ran at Arena Stage in July, unfolds like a history play, full of strange references to arcane things like the telephone book. The footage seen in the powerful documentary "How to Survive a Plague," about the activist group ACT UP, feels decidedly archival and historical — is that a breadbox or a cellphone? — to eyes used to the clarity of hand-held digital cameras. There is metamorphosis in the texture of memory, the smells, soundtrack and taste of it, as the age of AIDS looks as remote as the sun-drenched, leached-out colors of old Vietnam War films.

MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST

REVIVED: Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart," at Arena Stage last month with Patrick Breen, left, and Luke Macfarlane, has the patina of history today.

It's not just that the 1980s and '90s are slipping ever further into the past. If cultures remember the past in any way analogous to how individual people do, we seem to be at the moment when it's safe to pull out the old

photo albums, thumb through images of lost love and departed friends and submit to the full weight of emotional reminiscence. We live in a culture in which we argue over what happened five seconds ago. But the AIDS years are rapidly becoming settled history, with nostalgia creeping into how an older generation remembers them and the shock of surprise as a younger generation learns them for the first time.

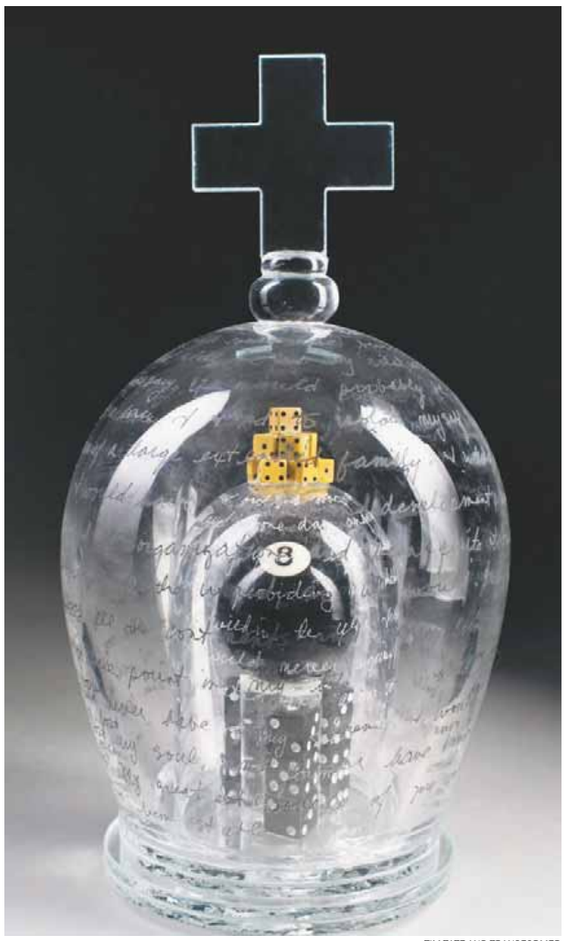
David France, the director of "How to Survive a Plague," has seen the phenomenon firsthand at advance screenings of his film, which opens Sept. 21. An older generation that lived through the worst of the AIDS crisis has broken with a self-imposed moratorium on thinking about death and disease, and a younger generation is experiencing the film as an introduction to a chapter of history that, for different reasons, many people have conspired to forget.

"What is becoming plain is that people who didn't experience the plague years have an idea that something really awful happened, but it got better — that the system took care of it," says France. "What they don't know is the real revolutionary work that got done, in part by AIDS activists."

France sees his film as a step toward taking up a narrative thread that was broken sometime in the 1990s.

"In the past, cultural representations of AIDS have all been about the tragedy of it, about how dark and hideous it was, that this unknown disease came and targeted a community," says France. "All of that was true, but we stopped our storytelling right in the middle of it, and we haven't until now gone back to resume that storytelling."

The broken thread in the narrative, his film argues, is the role the gay community played in directing and shaping the medical research that eventually led to the drugs that now prolong life, apparently indefinitely, for most of those lucky enough to have access to them. Groups such as ACT UP, the militant-yet-disciplined activist organization that put the story on the nightly news and forced it onto the political agenda, also shaped the history of medical research. Susan Ellenberg, a statistician who was working for the



TIM TATE AND TRANSFORMER

NOW: Tim Tate's "Two Paths Taken," from 2005, has two glass bubbles, the inner one etched with text describing his life with HIV, the outer one describing the life he fantasized about had he tested negative.

National Institutes of Health at the time (and who appears in France's film), agrees with that assessment. Today, thanks to the work ACT UP did a generation ago pioneering participatory medicine, patients and families of patients are intimately involved in shaping the research agendas of scientists working on breast cancer and a host of other diseases, says Ellenberg.

"United in Anger," another recently released AIDS documentary, takes France's argument even further, suggesting that ACT UP helped drive arguments still in play today about universal health care, poverty and racism. Both films present the once-feared and widely derided activist group, which fell into bitter infighting and fast irrelevance in the mid-1990s, as an innovative, even revolutionary force in American politics. And they recast the history of AIDS to include something of which the people involved, and younger generations of activists, can be proud.

They also question cherished pieties of

mainstream politics, reminding a new generation about the devastating indifference and neglect of the Reagan and first Bush administration in dealing with the disease. Old archival footage shames open bigots such as Sen. Jesse Helms, who is seen fulminating against Sodomites on the Senate floor. And figures now seen as grandfatherly avatars of an innocent yesteryear, such as George H.W. Bush, are heard piously and impatiently condemning a generation of men who were inconveniently dying on their watch. Both films also address the highly controversial ACT UP protest at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, called to challenge the Catholic Church's influential condemnation of condoms, the only hope of survival for sexually active people during the crisis. The hostility directed at the group after disrupting a religious service is now seen in a broader more sympathetic historical perspective.

'Creating lineages'

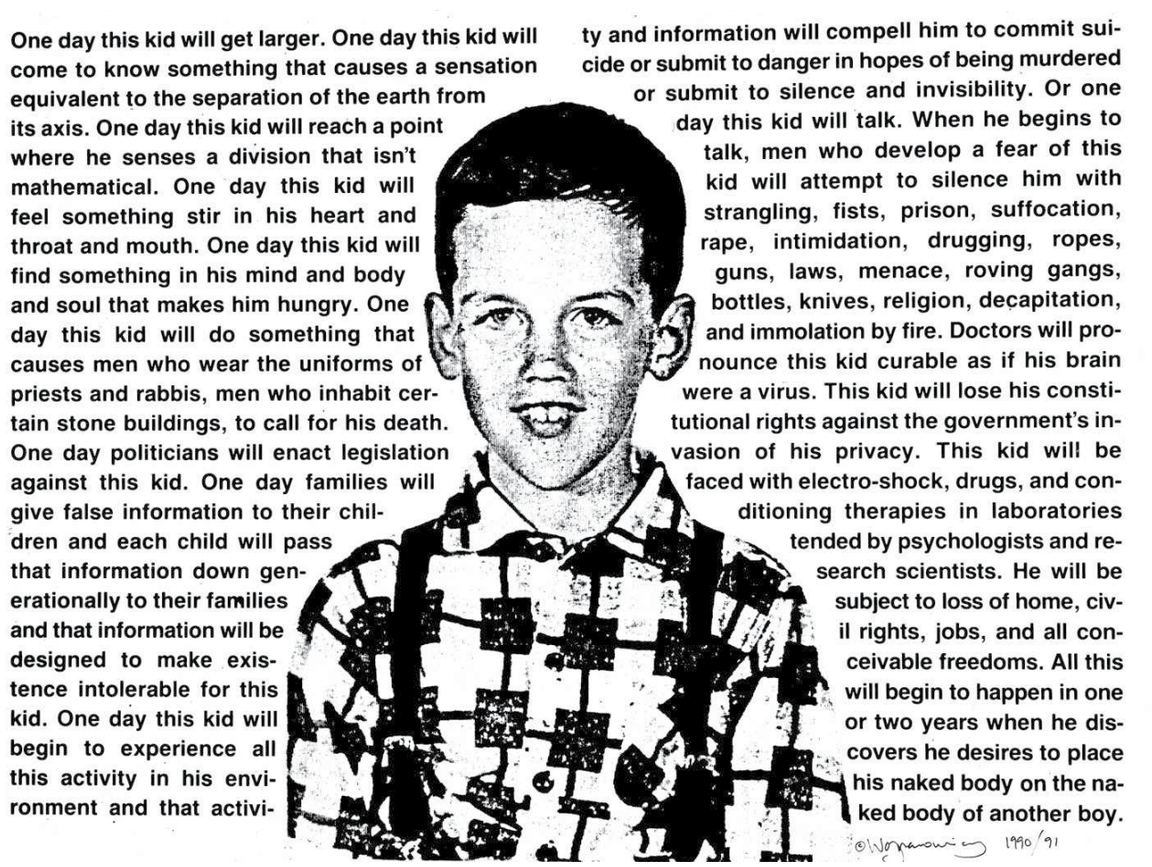
"I think ACT UP changed the world," says Kramer, author of "The Normal Heart." Kramer was founder of ACT UP, and now a legendary and legendarily irascible eminence grise in the gay movement. "The Normal Heart," which had an off-Broadway run in 1985, offers a pre-history to the period covered in the two recent AIDS documentaries. Set in 1981-84, it is one of the bleakest documents of the early days of AIDS, an unrelenting howl of fear and anger that was almost unbearably raw when it first premiered. Broadway producer Daryl Roth organized a staged reading of it October 2010, and the response was powerful enough that she brought the play to Broadway, where it won three Tony Awards.

"Much to everyone's surprise, it was as if it was happening today," says Kramer, of the initial response to the 2010 reading. "It really freaked everyone out. Everyone thought about it as some kind of period piece."

The initial audiences for the Broadway production, according to Kramer, were mainly older gay men. But the producers instituted a "30 under 30" policy, which gave $30 admission to people under the age of 30. The policy worked.

"The play started selling out with all these kids," says Kramer. "They were just completely bowled over."

Roth saw a double process in the inter-



PPOW GALLERY AND THE ESTATE OF DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

THEN: David Wojnarowicz's "Untitled (One day this kid. . .)," from 1990, describes the alienation and persecution a boy will face when he realizes he is gay.

generational audiences that flocked to the show. The quarter century that had elapsed since the play was first produced allowed older audiences to experience it not just as a piece of political protest, but as art. And it allowed younger audiences to connect to older viewers.

"Being able to see the play from a distance had two benefits," says Roth. "It was easier to view it as a piece of powerful theater because it wasn't as devastating and raw as it was then, and it was a time for people of that generation to revisit and remember, painful as it is."

Roth also noticed that many audience members came in groups. "Older people were bringing younger people." Mothers came with their sons. "It was something that people wanted to share and talk about."

That suggests that yet another, broad change is happening to the memory of AIDS. Collective memory is often tribal, jealousy guarded, closed to outsiders. The trauma of AIDS — or war, or genocide — binds those who experienced it so tightly that there is no energy left for other affinities. "You weren't there," and "You don't understand" are the defensive reactions of people unwilling to see memory pass into collective possession, with the inevitable distortions, simplifications and cliches that come with giving up one's personal past to History.

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An exhibition produced by Transformerand Visual AIDS (a New York-based group devoted to addressing AIDS and preserving art made in response to it) hints at the complexities of the current, intergenerational moment in the memory of AIDS. Held at Fathom Gallery and curated by John Chaich, "Remixed Messages" juxtaposes works by canonical artists closely associated with AIDS, such as David Wojnarowicz and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, with work by younger artists who are not explicitly engaged with AIDS as a subject. Chaich says he is borrowing a term — "AIDS is a crisis of connections" — when he describes the organizing motif of the show. But it's an apt description of most of the art in the exhibition, which feels under the influence of AIDS in a less urgent but deeper and broader way. Whether or not the artists had AIDS in mind, they seem to be grappling with a set of AIDS-inflected moral truths: That intimacy is full of both grace and danger; that great traumas punctuate life irrevocably and make time less elusive; that the suffering which defines us cannot, should not, must not be cast off, even if that were possible. A sense of irony and provocation also defines much of the work, often palpably echoing the graphic design and dark humor of AIDS arts collectives that once plastered the streets of New York with posters.

Amy Sadao, the outgoing director of Visual AIDS, uses the term "creating lineages" to describe the cultural response of younger artists, especially gay or the more broadly defined "queer" artists. Younger artists are taking up the subject as their own, exploring the broader reach of the disease.

"Queer-identified artists, curators, performers, cultural workers, are attempting to find and define a queer history," she says. They don't necessarily feel themselves on the outside of a tribally held AIDS history curated by the older generation of mostly gay white men who are the heroes of David France's film. But there's also a sense of generosity, even gratitude to that generation.

"What I'm struck by is this younger generation's identification of that broken lineage, that missing history," says Sadao.

A historic moment, in hindsight

In 1996, journalist Andrew Sullivan published what was then a controversial and now classic essay, "When Plagues End," which explored the ambiguities of what changed with the introduction of anti-retroviral drugs and the so-called "Lazarus effect," which brought many HIV-infected people back from the brink of death. He used Albert Camus' novel "The Plague" to describe the richly unresolved emotional transition that many people went through. "We expect a catharsis, but we find merely a transition," wrote Sullivan. "We long for euphoria, but we discover only relief tinged with, in some cases, regret and depression." One of the great historical and defining moments in gay history passed without any real acknowledgment, in part because people were still uncertain, still scared, still shocked, and in part because the society was still pervasively homophobic and unwilling to acknowledge the role gay people played in their own redemption.

The plague wasn't over, as Sullivan acknowledged, and as was abundantly clear during the 19th Annual AIDS conference held in Washington last month. But something had changed, and only today is that something being finally processed. The threat of extinction passed on, yet only now is the emotional weight of that moment being acknowledged.

Gay history has always been complicated, by the very definition of homosexuality, which didn't enter the lexicon until the late 19th century, and by the enormous and ongoing changes in how people define gender, sex and sexuality. Gay history has had trouble getting started, from the abortive and shame-filled spectacle of Oscar Wilde to the decimation of AIDS that followed so fast upon the official beginning of modern gay culture in the rebellious 1960s. What seems to be happening now, as the horizon of time casts its shadow over the years of AIDS, is that gay men can see themselves properly in the historical mirror for the first time, and they like what they see. Suffering and all.

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