

The Normal Heart, 1987

The Normal Heart by Larry Kramer (1935–2020) was first produced in New York in 1985. It tells the story of AIDS activist Ned Weeks, his struggle to raise awareness of the disease, fighting government bureaucracy, and social stigma. Semi-autobiographical, it was set in New York between 1981 and 1984, during the first years of the pandemic. During the course of his activism, Weeks forms a relationship with New York Times journalist Felix who subsequently dies from the disease.

Kramer was himself a fervent AIDS activist, and one of the first to identify that the then unnamed disease was spreading due to promiscuity within the gay community. As a result, he founded the Gay Men's Health Crisis organisation to help support sufferers of the disease and prevent the spread. His methods proved too aggressive and led to his removal from the board of the organisation. Many of these events were recorded as scenes in the play. Following the play's release, Kramer went on to set up the direct-action group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

The play was received positively when it was performed at Project and, despite it being one of the most critical reviews of the production, the opening paragraph of David Nowlan's Irish Times review began:

The first thing to be said about Michael Scott's production of Larry Kramer's "*The Normal Heart*"...is that it should definitely be seen. The play is the first to have treated homosexuality and homosexual relationships without either coyness or sentimentality and the first to have tackled the problem of AIDS.^[1]

One of the main criticisms of the play was its relevance in light of better information and understanding of the disease. Director Michael Scott maintained that the Irish government's decision to cancel funding for AIDS campaigning (due to a general election earlier that year) was his main motivation in producing the play in Dublin. He is quoted as saying:

I look coldly on the fact that in January of this year the Government Health Bureau cancelled whatever AIDS campaign they were going to have, because there was going to be a general election. I don't know, nobody knows, how many people may have been exposed to the fatal disease through ignorance, while everybody decided to have a new government. I think that's inexcusable.^[2]

He also cited the Mayor of New York's statement from the same year, that there was 'no crisis', as proof of the play's ongoing relevance.^[3]

“The Normal Heart,” at the Project

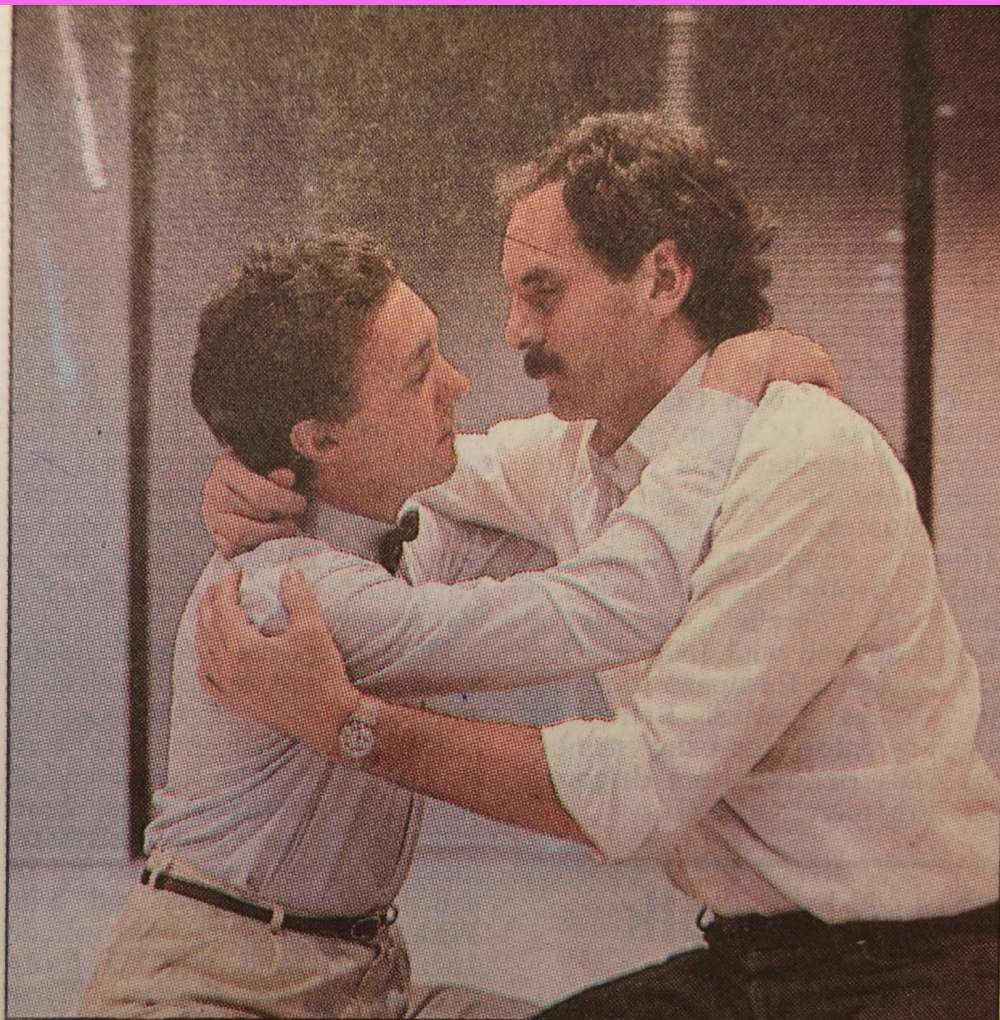
By David Nowlan

THE FIRST THING to be said about Michael Scott's production of Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart", which opened at the Project Theatre in Dublin last night, is that it should definitely be seen. The play is the first to have treated homosexuality and homosexual relationships without either coyness or sentimentality, and the first to have tackled the problem of AIDS.

That has to be said first because both play and production have several strikes against them which cannot be ignored yet which might deter potential audiences. The script is a mixture of healthy polemic (largely about the inertia of both gay and straight communities in New York in the face of the AIDS epidemic there) and maudlin melodrama (concerning the death of one gay activist's lover from the lethal virus disease).

It is the misfortune of this production that the script, itself an historic dramatic document, has largely been overtaken by subsequent history. The dramatic mechanisms used to enliven the preachy first act — mystery and dread engendered by a totally unknown disease — seem thin when so much more is known now than was known when the play was first staged in New York. And the production itself suffers from inconsistencies of style in setting, scene-changes and mood which fragment an already bitty script.

There is a lack of inner energy in the performances in the first act, and an over-indulgence in the melodrama of the second. But several scenes still stand out vividly: the touching defensiveness between Ned Weeks, the activist (a physically uneasy Anthony Newfield), and his straight brother (a too easy-going Clive Geraghty); the confrontation between the gay committee and blind inactive city hall; the mutually guilt-ridden love-laden scene between the gay lovers, and some more. Best performances come from Joseph Taylor as the dying lover, Jonathan Sharpe as a brash activist and Conor Mullen in several roles quietly and effectively executed.



Joseph Taylor and Anthony Newfield in "The Normal Heart", the American play about AIDS, now running at the Project Arts Centre

Scene from *The Normal Heart* (photographer unknown),
The Irish Times, 5th September 1987
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

"*The Normal Heart*" at the Project by David Nowlan,
The Irish Times, 21st August, 1987
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

[1] Nowlan, D. *The Normal Heart at the Project*. The Irish Times, 21 August 1987.

[2] Michael Scott cited in Thompson, P. *Slow Panic*. In Dublin Magazine, August 1987.

[3] Michael Scott cited in Hunter, C. *Drama of AIDS: not just another play*. The Irish Times, 20 August 1987.