

AIDS drama doesn't flinch

By BOB CAMPBELL

Typical summer theater — Montclair's TheatreFest, for example — aspires to be as restful as rippling surf. But this week, TheatreFest may whip up some angry waves.

Tomorrow night, on its second stage, TheatreFest opens Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart," a frank and passionate play about the indifference that allowed the AIDS epidemic to take root.

"The Normal Heart" is an explosive mix of clinical realism, political argument and intimate love story. Kramer's intensely personal look at the early stages of the AIDS plague has triggered controversy and debate since the play's premiere in 1985.

"In a way," says TheatreFest artistic director Phil Oesterman, "this is a history play, yet it's more relevant than ever. We've been bombarded by the media about AIDS, and we think 'if I hear any more about that I'll scream.' But it hasn't gone away. And it's not going to go away."

Kramer's play tells the semi-autobiographical story of a gay writer named Ned Weeks. Weeks becomes obsessed with the conspiracy of silence shrouding the nameless syndrome that's killing so many of his friends.

Weeks finds that heterosexuals shrug the threat aside, while fellow gays are afraid of risking their new-won freedoms and political gains. The order of the day is denial. Railing against opponents from Mayor Ed Koch to the most enlightened sexual radicals, Weeks becomes a fanatical crusader.

In the course of his battle, Weeks embarks on a love affair with

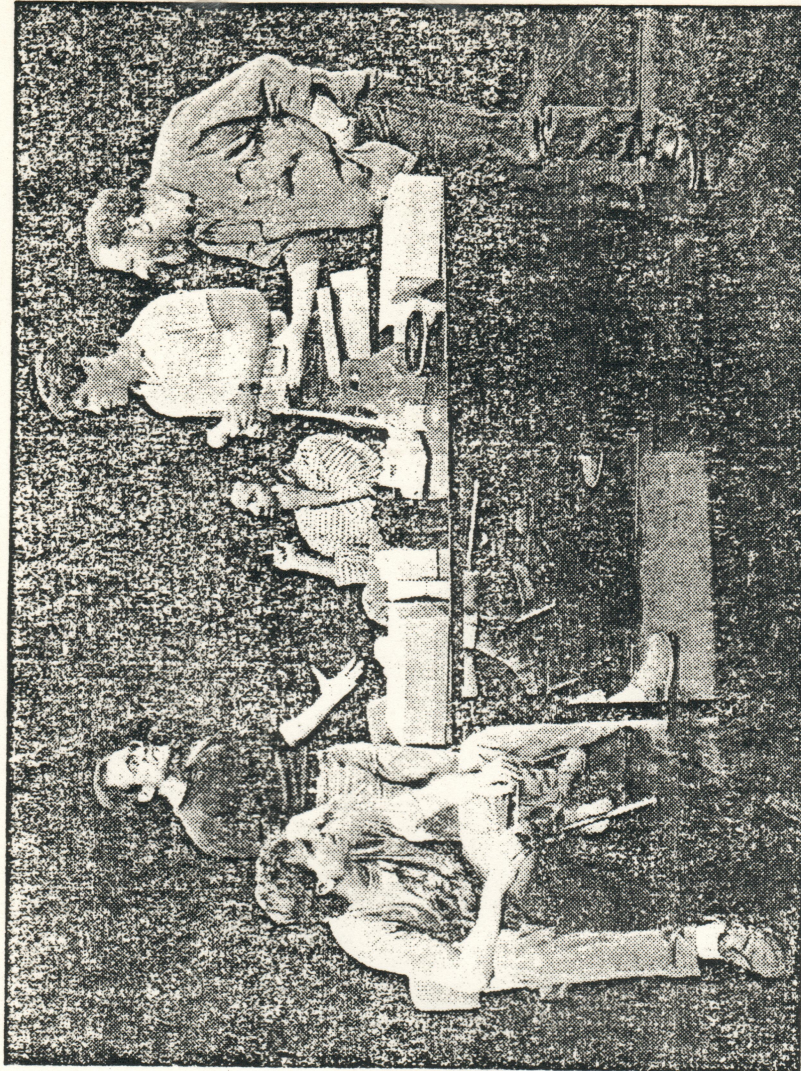


Photo by Jerry McCrea

TheatreFest artistic director Phil Oesterman, right, oversees a rehearsal of 'The Normal Heart' at Montclair State College. Cast members, from left, include John Wooten, Brian Hugh O'Neill, Jeffrey Wingfield and Jorry Griffin

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