

It's a common irony that strong feeling can make one incoherent, and passionate sincerity produce an awkward stammer.

Such seems to be the case with TheatreFest's brave and candid production of "The Normal Heart," Larry Kramer's grim play about the onslaught of AIDS. Phil Oesterman's staging is a labor of love, but it's choked by its own emotion.

Even so, this is a valid and gripping chronicle of an evolving apocalypse and a compassionate introduction to the complexity of American gay life. The production has flashes of raw power.

TheatreFest's Stage Two is a somber warehouse, with a sprawling mesa of a stage and shelf-like subsidiary stages flanking its long walls. Every inch of this black space is scrawled with statistics about AIDS and a necrology of victims. The scene has the blunt impact of the Vietnam memorial.

Yet the word AIDS is never even mentioned in "The Normal Heart," which covers the years 1981-1984. When the play begins, the gay friends of hero Ned Weeks are dying of a mysterious cancer that has no name and no provable cause. Only Ned and an obsessive woman doctor seem to be keeping count of the deaths and looking for a connection.

The play recounts Kramer's version of history through the efforts of Ned (the author's self-portrait) to awaken the world, both hetero- and homosexual, to the oncoming deluge. Kramer's picture of New York politics and the inner feuds within the gay community—afraid of negative publicity, public exposure, and a puritanical backlash—provides impressive testimony, however one-sided.

This documentary framework is more compelling than Ned's doomed love affair with a New York newspaper fashion reporter, who dies from the plague that—according to Kramer—his own newspaper wouldn't acknowledge.

Kramer tells a harrowing story, even if it's muddled by silly rhetorical rant about gay pride and nasty personal nudges of "I told you so."

But its power is dispersed in Oesterman's production, which strays all over the disconnected stage environment. Some of Kramer's 16 scenes seem to be taking place beyond the far horizon, and on opening night whole passages were drowned out by a droning air conditioner. The play is also unevenly cast, and its desperate shortage of rehearsal shows through.

Haggard, fashionably unshaven, Alfred Schmitz is an urgent and moving Ned, despite repetitious gestures and a monotonously pleading vocal tone. But Schmitz never suggests the furious firebrand who storms the media, terrorizes New York's Mayor Koch (wickedly traduced herein), and plots to bring an indifferent city to its knees.

The actor projects earnest sensitivity rather than radical rage. He's like Montgomery Clift playing Trotsky.

Astringent Brian Hugh O'Neill, with his whiplash presence and stinging articulation, brings more performing voltage to the small role of Mickey (a gay health worker) than Schmitz ever generates as Ned. O'Neill's electricity even reaches us from scenes played so far upstage they might as well be in an adjacent building.

O'Neill (who recently gave a fine performance in "Benefactors" at South Jersey Regional) would have been a more logical choice as Ned. His late aria of escalating hysteria is the best-acted moment in the show.

Oesterman concentrates on the love affair between Ned and the closeted newspaperman, and it's a boldly frank presentation of a romantic male affair. But after a while it seems simply mawkish, especially since Craig Wroe plays the dying lover with tremulous voice and teary smiles. Jerry Griffin is more effective as Bruce, a briskly masculine banker and ex-Green Beret, ambivalent about his place in the gay movement.

There are strong scenes. An early meeting of the men's health committee is a tragicomic mix of desperation and self-deception; it also provides a vivid cross-section of homosexual attitudes. There's a bitterly amusing encounter with the mayor's assistant, himself a closet gay.

The devastating centerpiece is Bruce's brutally clinical description of his lover's death throes on a Phoenix-bound airliner, and the ghastly fate of his corpse. At this moment "The Normal Heart" pounds with rage and spurts real blood.

Otherwise, its pulse falters. Liz Stearns manages to simultaneously over-emote and undercharacterize the wheelchair-bound AIDS doctor, and even the lines that she remembers correctly can often barely be heard. Stephen Bradbury is off-and-on as Ned's straight brother. Jeffrey Wingfield is a boldly effeminate black street queen whose best lines are swallowed by swampy acoustics.

Too much of "The Normal Heart" is muffled and remote, as if heard through a hospital wall or glimpsed through tears. The production lacks the manic, redeeming drive of Kramer's hero. It succumbs, forgivably, to its own overwhelming sorrow.



Photo by Jerry McCrea

Alfred Schmitz and Craig Wroe rehearse for 'The Normal Heart'

## OPENING IN JERSEY

# Noble 'Normal Heart' chokes with emotion

"The Normal Heart," by Larry Kramer, produced by TheatreFest Stage Two at Montclair State College, Valley Road, Montclair. Continues Tuesday-Friday at 8:30, Saturday at 6 and 9:30 and Sunday at 7:30 through July 30. All tickets \$10. Information: 893-5112.