

The Boston Globe

STAGE REVIEW

‘Normal Heart,’ uncommon heartbreak

By Terry Byrne | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 07, 2013



RICHARD HALL/SILVERLINE IMAGES

Joey C. Pelletier and Maureen Adduci star in Zeitgeist Stage Company's "The Normal Heart."

At the end of "The Normal Heart," when a Zeitgeist Stage Company member handed me a red ribbon, I was too choked up to look him in the eye.

Nearly 30 years after Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart" became a rallying cry in the fight against AIDS, Zeitgeist Stage's production chronicles the fury but captures the heartbreak of this love story.

In 1985, Kramer's semi-autobiographical play was an opportunity to educate anyone who would listen about the pandemic responsible for the deaths of so many young men. The strident, angry voice of Ned Weeks drives the founding of a fictional organization based on the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York. Despite his confrontational style, Weeks is determined to build unity among a group struggling to find personal dignity in a society that has labeled them as "sick," not because of disease but because of who they love.

Weeks's – and Kramer's – hectoring would be difficult to endure were it not for Victor Shopov's nuanced portrayal of this firebrand. It's not easy to find the vulnerability in a character driven to lash out at his friends and enemies with the same onslaught of damning facts and figures. But director David J. Miller makes sure Weeks lets his guard down in the scenes with his lover Felix (Joey C. Pelletier), and combined with Pelletier's unembellished portrayal of Felix, Shopov's Weeks reveals an essential tenderness and humanity.

Away from Felix, though, Weeks is unrelenting in his fight to raise awareness about AIDS. In addition to Weeks and Turner, we meet an assortment of men who are, if not radicalized, at least driven to action by the devastation of AIDS. There's Bruce (Mario DaRosa Jr.), a buttoned-down bank vice president chosen as the public face of the organization; Mickey (Mikey Diloreto), who works for the city health department; and Tommy (Mike Meadors), a dedicated volunteer who tries to keep the internecine fighting in check. In addition, there are the outsiders drawn into the battle, including Dr. Emma Brookner (a luminous Maureen Adduci), a physician who is caring for many AIDS patients, and Ben Weeks (Peter Brown), the heterosexual brother who struggles with Ned's activism.

In many ways, fear propels the actions of the characters in this play – fear of the repercussions of having their personal lives made public, complicated by the terror surrounding a disease that requires public awareness to find a cure. Director and set designer Miller amplifies the dramatic tension by keeping the action moving swiftly, even as he takes the time to build these intimate relationships.

Sound designer J Jumbelic has chosen iconic 1980s music (Donna Summer, Queen, Elton John, Patti LaBelle, and others) to set the tone for each scene, and Michael Flowers's extraordinary projections of documentary-style photos and snippets of video from demonstrations and celebrations complement Miller's spare set. It's the visuals screen that is particularly haunting, especially the barely readable list of names that appears at the top corners of the space at the end of each scene, first just a few, and then increasing in number until the entire screen is filled with names of AIDS victims.

In addition to a red ribbon, Zeitgeist also offers theatergoers the opportunity to add a name to the memorial walls Miller has placed outside the theater and inside the

entrance. It's a heartbreaking reminder of the devastating impact of AIDS and the vital importance of speaking up.

Terry Byrne can be reached at trbyrne@aol.com.