

Larry Kramer

Playwright & Activist 1935 -

by David Rosen

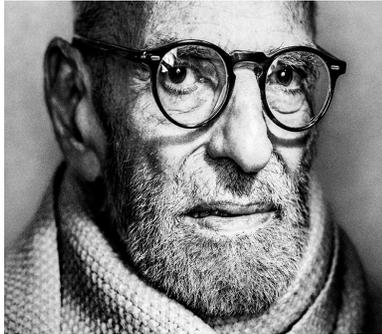
"If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble. If this article doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get." So begins Larry Kramer's 1983 rant against what he considered the self-serving gay establishment.*

Kramer's tirade, "1,112 and Counting," was published in the March 14, 1983, issue of the *New York Native*, a free gay weekly. He laid down a challenge to his fellow gay men and the city as a whole: "I repeat: Our continued existence as gay men upon the face of this earth is at stake. Unless we fight for our lives, we shall die. In all the history of homosexuality we have never before been so close to death and extinction. Many of us are dying or already dead."¹

His rage was directed at many targets. Most personally, he assailed his fellow well-off white, gay men who refused to see what was happening to them. It pointed his rage at the city's gentry, most notably the *New York Times*, for sitting on their hands as the city faced an unprecedented natural disaster, an epidemic. But, most bitterly, he targeted the city's mayor, Ed Koch, now recognized as gay but then rumored to be a closeted homosexual.

Two years earlier, Kramer had carefully read Lawrence Altman's story, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," in the Friday, July 3, 1981, *New York Times*. Buried as filler for a long holiday weekend, the article frightened him, raising more questions than it answered. "The cause of the outbreak is unknown, and there is yet no evidence of contagion," it cautioned. Reading further, the tone darkened: "According to Dr. [Alvin] Friedman-Kien, the reporting doctor said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week." It also noted, "Many patients also reported that they used drugs such as amyl nitrite [i.e., "poppers"] and LSD to heighten sexual pleasure."²

Now, two years later, the once scary words had become the new reality and Kramer was furious. He was an leading figure of the post-Stonewall, hedonistic gay world. After reading the *Times* article, he went to his doctor with two friends for emotional support for a personal check up - he was found negative, but one friend was found positive. The new "gay cancer" was that close. Making matters worse, it would not be for another two months, on May 25, 1983 that the term "AIDS" appeared on the *Times* front-page. Most scandalous, during the first 14 months of the AIDS crisis,



* Photo: Out.com

the *Times* published only 7 articles on it; in comparison, during the first 3 months of Tylenol scare, it published 54 articles on that issue.³

Kramer lived the good life. Born in 1935, he was now, nearly 50 years later, a successful in-your-face white, Jewish gay man. He sported a Yale pedigree (class of '57), was a Hollywood insider with a major credit (producer, *Women in Love*) and author of a controversial first novel (*Faggots*). He split his time between a luxury Greenwich Village apartment at 2 Fifth Avenue and the Pines, a gay colony on Fire Island. He knew the gay scene, intimately, the nightlife of private parties, cabarets and sex clubs.

Kramer's *Faggots* was released in '78 by one of the city's most prestigious publishers, Random House. It propelled him to the pinnacle of Gotham's gay scene. Nothing does more for sales than controversy, the *buzz*. The book was an indictment of the wild hedonism that defined the period after the '69 Stonewall riots. One of Kramer's characters pleads, "I'm tired of being a New York City-Fire Island faggot. I'm tired of using my body as a faceless thing to lure another faceless thing, I want to love a Person!"⁴ It was a message the gay community -- his principle audience -- didn't want to hear.

One reviewer, P. D. Davis, says the book "caused outrage among the gay community who felt the portrayal of their lives was extremely negative and wildly exaggerated." The social costs for Kramer were considerable. He became, according to Davis, "persona non grata in the Manhattan gay milieu. He was ostracized and for two or three years many considered him a nemesis to the gay sexual revolution." Kramer challenged the gay community: Were gay men more than the sum of their body parts and pleasures?⁵

In the *New York Native* piece Kramer warned, "there are now 1,112 cases of serious Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS]. When we first became worried, there were only 41. In only twenty-eight days, from January 13th to February 9th [1983], there were 164 new cases -- and 73 more dead. The total death tally is now 418. Twenty percent of all cases were registered this January alone. There have been 195 dead in New York City from among 526 victims. Of all serious AIDS cases, 47.3 percent are in the New York metropolitan area." The article was reprinted in gay papers throughout the country.

In Gotham, between 1981 and 2004, over 190,000 individuals were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and approximately 90,000 died. Since AIDS/HIV was first diagnosed in 1981, 1.7 million Americans are estimated to have been infected, including over 619,000 who have died. It's one of the gravest "natural" disasters New York -- and the nation -- ever faced.⁶

Koch became mayor on January 1, 1978, as the Big Apple's bubble was popping. A stalwart of the Village Democratic organization, Koch had served five terms in Congress before his election as mayor. Kramer focused his rage about the city's mounting AIDS crisis on Koch. He ceaselessly lambasted the mayor for inaction and failing to acknowledge the gravity of the AIDS crisis. Koch's refusal to support a needle exchange program for drug users was particularly offensive, especially at a time when conservative Maggie Thatcher had implemented a program in Britain. Kramer's fury was most publicly expressed when he appeared on the *Today Show* and denounced Koch as "a pig."

As only in New York, Kramer and Koch lived in the same Greenwich Village apartment building at 2 Fifth Avenue

and, when crossing paths, Kramer regularly taunted the mayor. The issue that most galled Kramer was that Koch identified himself as a "lifelong bachelor." In the period after the Stonewall riot, this was especially troubling. For Kramer and other politically conscious homosexuals, coming out as *gay* was a critical assertion. Many within the Village's political scene knew that Koch was homosexual and, in particular, about his relationship with Richard Nathan.⁷ The establishment media rarely broached the subject, often alluding to a rumored romantic relationship between the mayor and his "beard," Bess Myerson, a former Miss America and then serving as the city's Commissioner of Consumer Affairs.

Kramer's hostility toward Koch lasted decades. In the late-'80s, when Koch spoke at a GMHC AIDS Walk, Kramer stood out with a large placard that read, "Ed Koch: The Worst." In the early-90's, according to Calvin Trillin, Koch went to pet Kramer's dog and he said to the dog, "Molly, that's the man who killed all of Daddy's friends."⁸ As late as just a few months before Koch's death on February 1, 2013, Kramer remained angry toward the former mayor. Koch proposed the White House give Kramer the National Medals of Freedom and Kramer rejected the offer out of hand: "What is this evil man up to as he approaches his death? ... We must never forget that this man was an active participant in helping us to die, in murdering us."⁹

In October '82, Koch's liaison to the gay community, Herb Rickman, an out gay man, met with GMHC representatives. A formal meeting between Koch and the group was planned for April '83; unknown to all involved, it was a month after Kramer's "1,112 and Counting" article appeared. In the article, he assailed the mayor: "Our mayor, Ed Koch, appears to have chosen, for whatever

reason, not to allow himself to be perceived by the non-gay world as visibly helping us in this emergency." The group decided to exclude Kramer from the meeting, sensing a disaster in the making. Bitterly, he complained, they "wouldn't take me to the mayor, and I said, "'f you won't take me, I quit,' and so... ." He did just that.

Kramer spent the next two years remaking himself. He traveled to Europe and visited Dachau, the World War II concentration camp not far from Munich, Germany. The experience was transformative. The fate of European Jews provoked questions about the fate of American gay men infected with what was then a terminal illness. Dachau convinced Kramer that his rage was essential and that militant action was needed more than ever.

Kramer's action took two complementary forms, one intellectual, the other political. He channeled his creative forces into writing his first play, *The Normal Heart*, a savage critique of his experience at GMHC. He channeled his activism into helping found an activist group, ACT-UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power); its logo -- SILENCE = DEATH -- galvanized the city and nation.

Many possible directors and producers initially passed-on Kramer's play. Joseph Papp, founder of the city's groundbreaking Public Theatre, finally took a chance and agreed to produce it. Directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, the play opened on April 21, 1985, and as one scholar observed, the play "is, arguably, one of the most successful pieces of propaganda theatre ever produced. Unabashedly borrowing from prior agitprop works, it set out to instruct and arouse its audience to political passion and political action, a goal it seemed to achieve."¹⁰

Like his novel, *Faggots*, Kramer's *The Normal Heart* sparked controversy. It was an in-your-face challenge to New Yorkers, gay and straight, and especially its political and cultural elite, about their failure to meaningfully address the AIDS crisis. It was a Brechtian dirge, didactic and demanding. The set was barren, consisting of a few pieces of furniture. The walls of the theatre were agitprops, used to drive the play's message; they were lined with the gruesome statistics, regularly updated, of the AIDS crisis, including the death toll and the pathetic level of federal and city spending to fight the new plague.

When the play opened, both the *Times* and *Village Voice* gave it a thumb's down, only enhanced its significance. *The Normal Heart* ran for 294 performances at the Public before opening in Los Angeles, London and other cities; it finally opened on Broadway in 2011 and an HBO movie version, starring Alec Baldwin, Julia Roberts and Mark Ruffalo, was broadcast on 2014. The '85 opening of *The Normal Heart* signals the turning point in the AIDS crisis. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, signaled its containment.

By '87, Kramer was ready for something very different. He had regained his standing in the city's literary community, especially within the competitive gay scene. Now he sought to change ideas into action, from analysis to intervention. Working closely with other anti-AIDS activists, they created a new form of direct action, ACT-UP, changing the nation's political vocabulary.¹¹

On March 24, 1987, it organized a "die in" at the New York Stock Exchange and, over the following five years, intervened at a wide array of

institutions. It protested at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital, calling for an increase in the number of anti-HIV drugs; it shamed Northwest Airlines for refusing to seat a man with AIDS; it embarrassed *Cosmopolitan* magazine over an article that argued that few women contracted HIV or developed AIDS; it protested at the FDA's Maryland headquarters and at a U.S. Civil Rights Commission's AIDS hearing; and even took over the studio of the PBS MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour flashing a sign, "The AIDS Crisis is Not Over." Perhaps most controversial, two weeks before Christmas in '89, it organized a demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral in which 111 demonstrators were arrested both inside and outside the church.¹² It's still intervening.

During this period, gay activists -- whether at ACT-UP, GMHC or other groups -- confronted a nation increasingly divided over homosexuality and AIDS. In '86, the Supreme Court ruled in *Bowers v Hardwick* that the Constitution did not extend privacy rights to gay adults who engage in consensual sodomy; this was reversed in *Lawrence v Texas* (2003). That same year, Dr. C. Everett Koop issued the first Surgeon General's report on AIDS. He argued that it was time to shift the medical discussion of AIDS from that of an "epidemic," comparable to bubonic plague or yellow fever and requiring mandatory quarantine of infected people, to one of a chronic "disease," amenable to long-term care. However, the big medical news in '88 that year was that azidothymidine (AZT), a 1960s anticancer drug, showed signs in clinical trials to be effective in slowing HIV growth in infected people.¹³

By the late-80s, the AIDS crisis began to stabilize. In '87, Pres. Reagan made his first public speech about AIDS and established a Presidential Commission

on HIV. Sadly, many well-known people died, including Rock Hudson, Perry Ellis, Liberace, Alvin Ailey, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, Rudolf Nureyev, Arthur Ashe and 13-

year old Ryan White. In '93, Kushner's play about AIDS, *Angels in America*, won both a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

For more information:

Larry Kramer, *Faggots* (New York: Random House, 1978).

Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

Larry Kramer, *The American People, Volume I: Search for My Heart* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

David Leavitt, "The Making of Larry Kramer's 'America'", *New Yorker*, May 19, 2015.

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-making-of-larry-kramers-americans>

Notes:

¹ [New York Native, Issue 59, March 14-27, 1983; <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/05/66488.html>]

² [NYT/July 3, 1981,

³ Kramer/xx; Gavril/51] [Mass/q-130]

⁵ <http://phdavies.wordpress.com/2011/08/19/larry-kramer-faggots-review/>

⁶ <http://greaterthanone.org/about/hivaids-facts.html>
<http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/statistics/>

⁷ [David Rothenberg/xx]

⁸ [Gavril/41; Mass/q-310]

⁹ <http://www.towleroad.com/2012/10/ed-koch-savaged-by-larry-kramer-after-reviewing-aids-documentary-and-failing-to-mention-his-own-sad-.html>

¹⁰ Gavril/50]

¹¹ [Kaiser/321-22; see also <http://nymag.com/news/features/act-up-2012-4>]

¹² <http://www.thebody.com/content/art14001.html>

¹³ <http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/ps/retrieve/Narrative/qq/p-nid/87>
<http://www.avert.org/aids-history-86.htm>