

Dramatic Revolutions: The Transformative Role of 20th Century Theater in the Fight for Gay
Civil Rights

Charlie Hammond

Gender & Queer Studies

Mr. Nelson

17 May, 2023

Remarkably, the simple act of dressing up and performing lines from a script can fundamentally shift societal attitudes towards a marginalized group. As playwright Bertold Brecht stated, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” Such is particularly the case with the role of mainstream theater in the progression of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. This pivotal and often overlooked avenue of activism served not only as a conduit for visibility and representation, but as a powerful platform for societal change. Mainstream drama, with its unique ability to humanize complex narratives, played a crucial role in shaping the narrative around the LGBTQ+ community during the 20th century, especially through the HIV/AIDS epidemic. 20th century landmark productions—primarily *The Boys in the Band*, *The Normal Heart*, and *Angels in America*—played a crucial role in expanding the visibility and acceptance of queer characters in mainstream theater, advancing the socio-political discourse surrounding homosexuality. As an organ of representation, theater provided a voice for the queer community, ultimately helping to change American society’s perception of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Gay characters have existed in American drama since its beginnings; however, rarely were these peripheral characters—and hence their lives and the issues they faced—explicitly identified as homosexual. In shows like *Tea and Sympathy*, sexuality was a nebulous and superficial facet of theater, certainly not its primary message. It was not until the 1960s, following Stonewall and the success of Matt Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band*, that a greater freedom emerged to explore the taboo subject of homosexuality. Once *Boys* had moved gay characters to centerstage, so did the diverse, sincere explorations of sexuality’s intersection with politics, community, identity, and culture. Composed by queer playwrights, these pieces of theater were pleas for equality, indictments of the homophobia that plagued American society.

When the HIV/AIDS epidemic struck the queer community, theater's power became even more relevant through plays like *The Normal Heart*, which knit activism and drama together to demand social action. The unique medium of theater allows audience members to step into the lives of characters and build empathy towards those different from themselves. In this way, theater has always been a place for the marginalized to vocalize their oppression—its stories function as catalysts for national conversation, as evident in the profound impact of American queer drama.

In order to examine the influence of mainstream gay theater, it is crucial to acknowledge the existing schools of thought surrounding the subject. In his 2016 work *Mainstream AIDS Theatre, the Media, and Gay Civil Rights*, Professor and historian Jacob Junutun argued that 20th century mainstream theater allowed for the assimilation of emerging ideologies about gay civil rights into the national conversation. Following the HIV/AIDS epidemic, there was a period of “great national reorganization in the U.S. around the topic of LGBT citizens,” largely due to the impact of plays like Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*.¹ Similarly, Professor David Román asserted in *Acts of Intervention* that AIDS theater created “new ways of imagining community,” both allowing LGBTQ+ individuals to better cope with the crisis and helping integrate the community into the collective U.S. identity.² On the other hand, historian Kaier Curtin claimed that some pieces of mainstream theater, like *The Boys in the Band*, fueled internalized homophobia and profited by parading the dark side of gay life to a mainstream audience.³ As commercialized drama played primarily to heterosexual, middle-class audiences, Curtin contended that some gay plays were exploitative in their portrayals of queer identity.

¹Jacob Juntunen, *Mainstream AIDS Theatre, the Media, and Gay Civil Rights: Making the Radical Palatable* (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2016), 3.

²David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 7.

³Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (New York, NY: Alyson Publications, 1987).

Furthermore, noted scholar Baz Kershaw argued that the contemporary conditions, like globalization and capitalism, have hindered the radical nature of theater, stripping it of its potential to stimulate social change—he asserted that “the power of performance is sucked dry” by commercialized society.⁴ Hence, when viewed in culmination, these scholars reveal that the relationship between mainstream gay theater and social change is a diverse and disputed field; this paper aims to expand on these existing schools of thought and provide a unique contribution to its discipline.

As delineated by Kershaw, some scholars contend that mainstream theater parades commercialized portraits of real people and is too conservative to stimulate meaningful societal change; instead, it is radical theater that promotes new ways of thinking.⁵ The contemporary theater landscape is often characterized by its commercialization, boasting productions that prioritize box office success and mass appeal. While this approach may result in financial success and a greater longevity of the productions—transfers to tour, regional, and amateur locations—it often sacrifices the potential for meaningful societal change. Such a phenomenon is particularly evident with the Disney franchise’s partial annexation of Broadway, yielding theatrical adaptations like *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, and *Frozen*. These commercialized, capitalistic pieces remain Broadway’s highest grossing productions of all time: *The Lion King* stands at number one, with a gross of over \$1.8b, with *Wicked* at a close second at \$1.5b.⁶ Often driven by a desire to attract a broad audience, such mainstream productions shy away from controversial topics and provocative themes that may alienate potential viewers. This conservatism can limit the medium's ability to explore complex social issues and to engage

⁴Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London, England: Routledge, 1999), 47.

⁵Kershaw, *The Radical*.

⁶Jennifer Taylor, "25 of the Highest-Grossing Broadway Shows Ever," GOBankingRates, last modified June 10, 2022.

audiences in thought-provoking discussions—as Professor David Savran asserted, commercial theater is often “stripped of its impulse for radical...change.”⁷ In contrast, radical theater seeks to threaten stifling conformity and expand the national conversation surrounding a certain social issue, such as those related to sexuality, gender, race, ability, or immigration. As in the most famous radical theater group, *Theater of the Oppressed*, the experimental nature of radical theater allows for the exploration of innovative staging, design, and storytelling techniques that can further contribute to its provocative nature and transformative potential. Kershaw further vocalized that because modern capitalism was tragically robbing theater of its radical potential, it is necessary for theater-makers to rebut conformity and utilize performance methods outside of the mainstream, such as in protests and parades.⁸ Yet, can this type of radical theater successfully produce the same type of visibility as a Broadway production? The short answer is no.

While radical theater develops emerging progressive ideology, it is only in a mainstream setting that these ideas can integrate into national conversation and accordingly advance the dominant ideology. Obviously, considering their Disney-esque themes, the aforementioned pieces of commercial theater (*Wicked*, etc.) have little voice in stimulating meaningful socio-political change. The productions that do, however, are those tackling more controversial, contemporary issues, which are the majority of the mainstream shows produced over the past few decades. Take *Angels in America*, one of the most mainstream plays of the 1990s, whose impact on HIV/AIDS visibility is difficult to overstate. Hence, the creative environment of radical theater is essential for nurturing innovative ideas and encouraging artists to push the envelope, but only once these ideas are mainstream can they come to fruition in American society. Producer and director Amy Marie Haven asserted that radical theater tends to “preach to

⁷David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 224, JSTOR.

⁸Kershaw, *The Radical*.

the choir.”⁹ Those that attend radical performances are, generally speaking, not the ones who need to hear the radical message most—in other words, it’s much more likely for a homophobe to stumble into a production of *Rent* than into a blackbox interactive piece about queerness. Moreover, the small production size—think blackbox or Off-Off Broadway—renders it nearly impossible for its messages to reach a national audience. Mainstream theater, however, with its merchandising, television performances, reviews, and centralized location in Times Square, has the opportunity to reach millions of Americans and convey new ideology. Jacob Juntunen asserted that while radical ideology may “lose some teeth” in the process, the “widespread dissemination that occurs from inclusion in the culture industry is the only way to shift the dominant ideology.”¹⁰ This mainstream element is precisely why gay theater in the 20th century had such a profound impact on Americans: its themes were able to reach national audiences. By incorporating stories with gay characters, and, later, ones focused on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Broadway productions were able to support the emergent ideology of gay civil rights and weave it into the national conversation, ultimately helping grant LGBTQ+ individuals a new place in the U.S. nation.

In 1968, Matt Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* first introduced New York audiences to homosexual life and the dilemmas facing American gay men, opening the door for constructive national dialogue surrounding homosexuality. When *Boys* exploded onto the Off-Broadway stage, it presented its cast of eight gay men with unprecedented emotion, color, and candor. The play immediately distinguished itself from the then-lackluster canon of queer theater. As Ben Hodges asserted in *Out Plays*, Crowley’s piece put to sleep the “euphemistic and ambiguous themes of *Tea and Sympathy*” (a previous hall-marker of gay drama), where sexuality was a

⁹Amy Marie Haven, interview by the author, New York, December 5, 2022.

¹⁰Juntunen, *Mainstream AIDS*, 4.

peripheral and largely unspeakable phenomenon. *Boys* was “a harbinger of the tectonic shift about to occur in the gay community; it was a coming out party for gay and lesbian theater that ushered in the Stonewall era.”¹¹ Set in New York City, *Boys* follows a group of gay men who gather for a birthday party. As the men drink and socialize, their problems with both the world and their own identities quickly surface, ultimately culminating when the host, Michael, insists upon playing a drunken game: each guest must call the one person they've ever truly loved. To middle-class, midcentury America, the play was a shock—professor and historian John M. Clum noted how “for the first time, mainstream audiences [saw] gay men talk openly about their sexual predilections, dance together, kiss, and retire upstairs for sex.”¹² Yet, it is precisely this openness that rendered the play almost impossible to stage. In 2018, Crowley reflected on how, at first, “nobody wanted the play; not even agents wanted to look at this play. They just thought it was pornographic and it was outrageous.”¹³ When Laurence Luckinbill agreed to play Hank—the “straightest” of the gay characters—his agent told him (who was a lesbian, mind you) he might as well say goodbye to his career.¹⁴ Even once the play had opened, the actors still felt compelled to distinguish themselves from the characters they embodied eight times a week. A *New York Times* article on one of the actors was entitled, “You Don't Have to Be One to Play One.” As his wife poured his beer, actor Cliff Gorman told the reporter, “I already knew how to lisp because I'd been telling gay jokes since I was a kid.”¹⁵ This climate of intolerance demonstrates just how risky *Boys* was: in the 1960s, homosexuality was not only still classified as a mental illness by

¹¹Ben Hodges, ed., *Out Plays: Landmark Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Alyson Books, 2008), xvii.

¹²John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), 204.

¹³Jeff Lunden, “Mart Crowley, Playwright of ‘The Boys In The Band,’ Dies at 84,” NPR, accessed March 10, 2020.

¹⁴Jesse Green, “A Brief History of Gay Theater, in Three Acts,” *The New York Times*, last modified February 26, 2018.

¹⁵Judy Klemersrud, “You Don't Have to Be One to Play One,” *The New York Times*, last modified September 29, 1968.

the National Psychiatric Association, but it was a criminal offense. And yet, even though Crowley's agent warned him that America was not ready for his play, Crowley sent it to producer Richard Barr, and it opened Off-Broadway on April 14, 1968.

Though critics viewed *Boys* through different lenses, they were united in their assessment of the play's revolutionary status, demonstrating a significant stride towards national recognition of the gay community. Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* called it, "quite an achievement" and "by far the frankest treatment of homosexuality [he had] ever seen on the stage."¹⁶ *Variety*'s Richard Hummler asserted that the play shed "dramatic light" on the gay community.¹⁷ Yet, in their reviews, critics did not forgo derogatory epithets; in Barnes' same insightful piece, he called the content "screamingly f...g" and the men "middle-aged fairy queens." This astounding paradox between recognition and bigotry once again emphasizes how new a phenomenon it was in 1968 for gay culture to appear in the mainstream: critics were unable to disentangle their analyses of gay themes onstage from their own prejudices. Startlingly, however, *Boys* was visited by the likes of Jackie Kennedy, Groucho Marx, and New York's mayor, John Lindsay, in the production's first weeks.¹⁸ *Boys* was generating a buzz—for the first time, a gay play had not only reached broader America, but was penetrating the circles of highborn socialites and politicians. Over the next 1,002 performances, *Boys* began to slowly humanize the enigmatic, cartoonish, and often perverted caricature that most Americans held of gay men. Crowley taught American audiences that gay men are "human beings" who, like the rest of us, "go to bed with a hangover and then start all over again the next day. Like life."¹⁹

¹⁶Clive Barnes, "Theater: 'Boys in the Band' Opens Off Broadway," *The New York Times*, last modified April 15, 1968.

¹⁷Richard Hummler, "'The Boys in the Band,'" *Variety*, last modified April 17, 1968.

¹⁸Green, "A Brief," *The New York Times*.

¹⁹Rex Reed, "Breakthrough By 'The Boys In the Band,'" *The New York Times*, last modified May 12, 1968.

Moreover, one of the most tangible manifestations of how *Boys* helped shift the national dialogue around queerness is the *NYT*'s system of "Letters to the Editor" in the 1960s. In these anonymous letter exchanges, readers would express their judgements on the play, as well as respond to the opinions of other Americans. In one particularly amusing letter, a man responded to a letter sent in by a woman named Katherine Vandegraft in which she condemned *Boys*' candid homosexuality: "Some day when you, Mrs. Vandegraft, discover that your brother, your son, or perhaps your husband is a homosexual and has been leading a double life, you might be sorry that you didn't see *The Boys in the Band*. It might have helped you approach the problem with some degree of compassion and understanding."²⁰ A different letter remarked how seeing *Boys* revealed to the reader how gay Americans "cannot be ignored, as they are an integral portion of our society." Hence, *Boys*' unabashed portrayal of gay men during an era of horrid bigotry effectively stimulated meaningful conversation surrounding homosexuality, helping to challenge the homophobia that plagued American society. The single most profound impact that *Boys* might have had on the nation, as some historians have speculated, is its emboldening of Stonewall. Scholar and professor James Fisher asserted that it is "no coincidence" that Stonewall followed the premiere of *Boys*.²¹ In placing gay life centerstage, *Boys* primed New York City for the emerging battle for civil rights. Yet, even beyond its Stonewall implications, Crowley's play was sensational: as the first mainstream play to confront homosexuality, it challenged prevailing bigotry and set the stage for a more inclusive theater landscape. At last, *Boys* had broken the silence. Now that Crowley's triumph had inaugurated the canon of gay theater, there emerged a slightly greater liberty for queer playwrights to tell their stories. Over the next decade, shows like Harvey Fierstien's *Torch Song Trilogy* were tolerance pleas that helped move gay characters to

²⁰Drama Mailbag: "The Boys in the Band," *The New York Times*, last modified June 16, 1968.

²¹James Fisher, ed., *'We Will Be Citizens:' New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company,, 2008), 3.

the spotlight, offering increasingly diverse, frank, and candid explorations of LGBTQ+ identity. However, the canon had yet to truly flourish: gay theater in the mainstream was generally confined to *Boys* and *Torch Song*. It was not until the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s that gay theater became a dominant—if not *the* dominant—subject of commercial American drama.²² As HIV/AIDS cases surged, the theater became a battleground for combatting both the rising societal homophobia and government ineptitude; slowly, the image of gay Americans broadened and deepened, with drama shifting from celebrations of ‘70s gay camp to angry demands for change.

Within the canon of AIDS drama, Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* was one of the first and most visceral activist pieces, as it opened America’s eyes to the intimate, interpersonal horrors of the epidemic. In the first five weeks of *The New York Times*’ report of an unnamed illness found in gay men, Kramer established himself as an outspoken AIDS activist: he held a series of fundraisers in his apartment, published articles and editorials condemning America’s slow response, and, later, founded ACT UP, a grassroots political group that fought to end the AIDS epidemic.²³ Kramer focused on decrying Ronald Reagan’s neglectful administration, whose “Republican Revolution” chose to entirely ignore the epidemic. In 1985, Kramer turned to the stage to raise visibility and voice his exasperation, debuting his largely-autobiographical *The Normal Heart* at the New York Shakespeare Theater Festival before it transferred Off-Broadway to the Public Theatre; in infusing his activist anger into the play, Kramer quickly proved again theater’s power to inspire change. As Jacob Junutun claimed, “in the end it was not the news media, the President, the Congress, the NIH, or the CDC that brought public attention to AIDS and all the failures in its management. It was a mainstream play: *The Normal Heart*.”²⁴ *The*

²²Fisher, *We Will*, 2.

²³Hodges, *Out Plays*.

²⁴Fisher, *We Will*, 32.

Normal Heart centers on Ned Weeks, a gay man attempting to organize a response to AIDS amidst apathy and denial from American society. *The Normal Heart* is a heartbreaking exploration of the ordinary individuals caught up in the crisis, all of whom fought an individual battle that echoed universally. Kramer's play is not broad or nonspecific—it is *personal*. Its intimacy underpins its triumph. At the end of the play, through tears over the death of his lover whom Weeks had just married on his deathbed, Weeks cries, “Why didn't I fight harder! Why didn't I picket the White House? All by myself if nobody would come.”²⁵ Weeks' character is a testament to the thousands of gay Americans who fought in a disinterested society for their community, boyfriends, husbands, and friends. In addition to the script, Kramer's set design further emphasized the show's demand for a wake-up call, with the theater walls featuring a running list of the names of the dead and mounting death toll subtotaled by state.²⁶ To step into the theater was to be forced to reckon with the epidemic, which most of America had yet to do.

Furthermore, once *The Normal Heart* had opened at the Public, its reviews reflected its groundbreaking nature. Although critics varied in their appraisals of the play's content, they collectively recognized the profound depth of its message. A *New York Times* review by Frank Rich included more information about the AIDS crisis than the newspaper published in the first four years of the epidemic, noting how the play's subject “justified its author's unflagging, at times even hysterical, sense of urgency.”²⁷ Clive Barnes, writing for the *New York Post*, noted how “what could have been a mere staged tract...transcends...into a fleshed-out...struggle in which warring ideologies do not fail to breathe, sweat, weep, bleed—be human.”²⁸ In 1985, for a popular, conservative publication to acknowledge the validity of Kramer's demands for change

²⁵Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1985), 118.

²⁶Fisher, *We Will*.

²⁷Frank Rich, "Theater: 'The Normal Heart,' by Larry Kramer," *The New York Times*, April 22, 1985.

²⁸Clive Barnes, "Plague, Play, and Tract," *New York Post*, May 4, 1985.

was quite remarkable, and most certainly would have challenged the ideologies of many mainstream readers. Just by reviewing the play, these commercial media outlets were expanding the conversation about AIDS, helping to kindle greater awareness of the epidemic—commercialized magazines were referring to AIDS patients as “human” in an age where people refused even being in their vicinity. Furthermore, the marketing strategy of the Public Theater highlighted the play’s demand for public action. An advertisement posted in the *New York Times* made no assertion as to why audience members should buy a ticket—it did not claim that the play was well-written, entertaining, or even a good piece of theater. Rather, in large white writing atop a black background, the ad read, “At least 300,000 Americans have already been infected by the AIDS virus,” with a small logo of *The Normal Heart* below the quote.²⁹ This ad reflects how Kramer’s play was more focused on education than art; *The Normal Heart* had a dedicated purpose of demanding action and leveraged its mainstream platform to do so.

Quite literally, *The Normal Heart* saved lives, jolting its audiences into reality in a way that the ill-defined health pamphlets and public information failed to do. By asking its audiences to share in the lives of the characters onstage, *The Normal Heart* utilized empathy to challenge the way that America treated and regarded AIDS patients. Audience members could not leave the theater without receiving AIDS pamphlets from dozens of different organizations, a study guide prepared by the AIDS Medical Foundation, and lists of addresses of organizations to donate to.³⁰ Inside each program was also an insert that gave audience members concrete ways to get involved in the fight. Moreover, the play sold merchandise and scripts, all of whose proceeds were donated to AIDS research and the care of its victims. By using the profits to directly fund

²⁹Public Theater, “Pre-Opening Normal Heart Heart Advertisement,” *The New York Times*, last modified 1985.

³⁰Juntunen, *Mainstream AIDS*, 38.

what the story depicted onstage, *The Normal Heart* is a chief example of harnessing commercialization for the greater good. Kramer's play debunks Baz Kershaw's aforementioned criticism of the capitalist, exploitative nature of mainstream theater, as even the play's merchandise helped turn its consumers into activists.³¹

Moreover, a deeper understanding of queer dramatic visibility can be achieved by contrasting *The Normal Heart* against *The Boys in the Band*. Predominantly, *The Normal Heart* humanized gay men in a way that *Boys* did not. Kramer's characters were not the internally-homophobic, vulgar, and shallow (though still important) characters of the 1960s—these were fleshed-out, complex human beings who brought their lives, struggles, and loves to the stage. Though *Boys* was critical in first bringing gay life to mainstream America, *The Normal Heart* took it a step further, allowing audiences to forge authentic relationships with the characters and share in their grief. After performing exclusively to sold-out audiences and repeatedly postponing its closing date, Kramer's play eventually became the longest running production in Public Theater history. Hence, by spurring national conversation about the AIDS epidemic and demanding recognition for “a culture that isn't just sexual,” as one of the characters declares, *The Normal Heart* demonstrates the pivotal role that mainstream theater plays in the American socio-political system.³²

That being said, no piece of theater produced during the AIDS epidemic was quite as impactful as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, whose historical framework and previous accolades fostered a milieu in which the production fully embraced the spirit of gay civil rights. First, *Angels* paralleled the unique cultural and political period in which

³¹Kershaw, *The Radical*.

³²Kramer, *The Normal*, 110.

its production ran, both reflecting the Reagan-era failures it emerged from and reifying the forthcoming “New Democrat” movement. After the deplorable silence from the Reagan and Bush administrations, Bill Clinton’s election campaign seemed to usher in a new era of LGBTQ+ equality. Clinton was the first presidential candidate to make promises to the gay community during his campaign, promising to treat LGBTQ+ individuals as citizens and end the ban on their military service. Kushner’s ambitious, two-part and seven-hour long production of *Angels* came into the world literally on the eve of Clinton’s election. While *The Normal Heart* “cried out into the wilderness” during the Reagan years, the opening of *Angels* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles marked a “messiah of hope” for the future of LGBTQ+ Americans.³³ David Román claimed that “to watch *Angels in America* on the eve of the [Clinton] election was to participate in a public ritual of hope.”³⁴ While Clinton’s promises were emblematic of the political shift towards LGBTQ+ citizenship, *Angels* was culturally emblematic of this advancement. Moreover, *Angels*’ promotion of gay equality coincided with the contemporaneous political debates of the 1990s, which forefronted issues surrounding gay marriage, adoption, and military service; as Kushner remarked in a *Time Magazine* interview, the emerging national dialogue gave the play a “certain electricity” that would foster its success.³⁵ While Clinton’s promises ended up being artificial, *Angels* delivered theirs. The play was a prelude to an era where, as the character of Prior commands, gay men “will be citizens.”³⁶

³³Juntunen, *Mainstream AIDS*, 61.

³⁴Román, *Acts of*, 204.

³⁵Henry III, William A. "Time: May 17, 1993, Angels in America," in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 1993), 212.

³⁶Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 146.

Moreover, before even opening on Broadway, its accolades helped position *Angels* to be mainstream theater's voice of gay civil rights. Following successful runs in Los Angeles, London, and San Francisco, the play was scheduled to open at the Public Theater, like *The Normal Heart*—however, its New York arrival was so anticipated that the production bypassed this try-out run and opened right on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre in 1993. *Angels* had been nominated for numerous Laurence Olivier Awards, as well as won an Evening Standard Theatre Award and a Critics Circle Theatre Award; on the eve of its first Broadway preview, *Angels* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Its honors indicated that the play was worthy of mainstream society's attention, as well as contributed to the ideological support for gay people gaining a greater place in American society. As aforementioned, this was all before the show even opened on Broadway. Once it officially premiered, its accolades continued to grow; the show went on to win the Tony Award for best play, highlighting America's growing recognition of queer representation.

A chief reason for why *Angels* was so successful was that it exemplified how issues of sexuality cut across a diverse range of communities—religious, familial, political, racial—which not many other plays did during this period. *Angels'* subtitle was “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” delineating how this play was not just for the gay community—its themes were pertinent to the entire country. While the content of *Angels* is rooted in the AIDS crisis, the play transcends the specifics to become a universal exploration of human identity; its “fantasia” is not merely about the angels that appear in the play, but the riveting journey into the human experience, which Kushner achieves through a masterful blend of realism and fantasy. While many viewed *The Normal Heart* as a form of gay propaganda, critics instantly canonized *Angels* as art. In a *New York*

Times review, Speight Jenkins compared the play to the works of Wagner, Verdi, and Berlioz, revealing its profound artistic merit that “need not be narrowly defined” as a drama about AIDS.³⁷ Theater critic Robert Brustein determined that the play was “universal,” suggesting a critical acceptance of *Angels*’ promotion of gay men as citizens.³⁸ Whether Americans liked it or not, there was a Broadway play declaring that gay men “will be citizens,” and commercial media was hailing it as “universal.” Hence, through its historical framework, accolades, and universality, *Angels* utilized its commercial platform to expand the national ideology around homosexuality, one in which gay men were equal citizens whom the government did not force to “die secret deaths,” as one character states.³⁹ *Angels* was mainstream theater’s voice of gay civil rights, opening the door for a new era of change.

Thus, mainstream theater of the 20th century advanced the socio-political discourse surrounding homosexuality, carving out a new space for LGBTQ+ individuals in the nation. Once *Boys in the Band* brought gay characters to centerstage, the 1960s ushered in a new era of queer representation, culminating during the HIV/AIDS epidemic as playwrights sought to demand government action and societal recognition. These productions were not mere artistic expressions: they embodied a cultural shift towards civil equality. By depicting queer narratives and characters, 20th century drama confronted established prejudices and stereotypes surrounding homosexuality, offering increasingly diverse and frank portraits of gay Americans. In examining these dramatic works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between art,

³⁷Speight Jenkins, "The Operatic Overtones of 'Angels in America,'" *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993.

³⁸Robert Brustein, "On Theater: Angels in America: Tony Kushner's Angels in America Actually Deserves All—or Almost All—the Hype," *The New Republic*, 1993.

³⁹Kushner, *Angels in*, 146.

representation, and social change during a vital chapter of LGBTQ+ civil rights. As such, theater is far more than a source of entertainment: it is an active political voice in our society.

Bibliography

- Barnes, Clive. "Plague, Play, and Tract." *New York Post*. Last modified May 4, 1985.
- . "Theater: 'Boys in the Band' Opens Off Broadway." *The New York Times*. Last modified April 15, 1968.
- Brustein, Robert. "On Theater: Angels in America: Tony Kushner's Angels in America Actually Deserves All—or Almost All—the Hype." *The New Republic*. Last modified 1993.
- Clum, John M. *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000.
- Curtin, Kaier. *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*. New York, NY: Alyson Publications, 1987.
- "Drama Mailbag: 'The Boys in the Band.'" *The New York Times*. Last modified June 16, 1968.
- Fisher, James, ed. *'We Will Be Citizens: New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2008.
- Green, Jesse. "A Brief History of Gay Theater, in Three Acts." *The New York Times*. Last modified February 26, 2018.
- Haven, Amy Marie. Interview by the author. New York. December 5, 2022.
- Henry III, William A. "Time: May 17, 1993, Angels in America," in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, 1993), 212.
- Hodges, Ben, ed. *Out Plays: Landmark Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*. New York, NY: Alyson Books, 2008.
- Hummeler, Richard. "'The Boys in the Band.'" *Variety*. Last modified April 17, 1968.
- Jenkins, Speight. "The Operatic Overtones of 'Angels in America.'" *The New York Times*. Last modified June 27, 1993.
- Juntunen, Jacob. *Mainstream AIDS Theatre, the Media, and Gay Civil Rights: Making the Radical Palatable*. New York, NY: Rutledge, 2016.
- Kershaw, Baz. *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London, England: Routledge, 1999.
- Klemesrud, Judy. "You Don't Have to Be One to Play One." *The New York Times*. Last modified September 29, 1968.

- Kramer, Larry. *The Normal Heart*. New York, NY: New American Library, 1985.
- Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.
- Lunden, Jeff. "Mart Crowley, Playwright of 'The Boys In The Band,' Dies at 84." NPR. Accessed March 10, 2020.
- Public Theater. "Pre-Opening Normal Heart Heart Advertisement." *The New York Times*. Last modified 1985.
- Reed, Rex. "Breakthrough By 'The Boys In the Band.'" *The New York Times*. Last modified May 12, 1968.
- Rich, Frank. "Theater: 'The Normal Heart,' by Larry Kramer." *The New York Times*. Last modified April 22, 1985.
- Román, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Savran, David. "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation." *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 207-27. JSTOR.
- Taylor, Jennifer. "25 of the Highest-Grossing Broadway Shows Ever." GOBankingRates. Last modified June 10, 2022.
<https://www.gobankingrates.com/saving-money/entertainment/25-highest-grossing-broadway-shows-ever/>.