



Martha Swope

D.W. Moffett and Brad Davis in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*

## Brad Davis 1949-1991

Nobody who saw Brad Davis in the original 1985 New York production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* will forget his blazing performance as Ned Weeks. Raging at the government and the press, and goading the gay community into action during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, the actor was passionate, charming, abrasive, and tender. In the same year that he gave his finest performance, Davis discovered he was HIV positive, but hid the fact for several years so he could keep on working.

"Since we were both in show business and we had a little girl to bring up, we were terrified that we would have no way to support our family if Brad went public [with his HIV status]," casting agent Susan Blustein, Davis's wife, told *TheaterWeek*. In a book proposal he submitted to a pub-

lisher shortly before he died, Davis said he earned his living in an industry "that professes to care very much about the fight against AIDS—that gives umpteen benefits and charity affairs with proceeds going to research and care—but in actual fact, if an actor is even rumored to have AIDS, he gets no support on an individual basis. He does not work."

Davis catapulted to stardom when he debuted in Alan Parker's controversial *Midnight Express*. But as he would recount later, success came too early and too fast. Already a substance abuser, he was unable to cope and became "a total drug addict—an alcoholic and I.V. drug user." Acknowledging that he was also sexually promiscuous, he observed that whenever anyone announces that he or she has AIDS, they are immediately asked "How did you get it?" Each way of getting AIDS carries its own degree of judgement or compassion, he noted, and "the fight against AIDS will always be handicapped and

hampered until such time as that kind of judgement is finally suspended across the board, and it is recognized that there aren't different kinds of victims—there are only victims . . . none of whom deserve to have this disease and all of whom deserve only compassion and support."

In the early 1980s, Davis stopped taking drugs and alcohol. Blustein, whom he met in 1972 and married five years later, stayed with him through the worst period of his withdrawal. In 1983, she gave birth to their daughter, Alexandra.

Davis appeared at the Cherry Lane Theater, replacing Maxwell Caulfield in Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* in 1981. He made his Los Angeles stage debut the following year at the Mark Taper Forum as Gregor in a production of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. His most controversial role was in German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's last film, *Querelle*, in 1983. Based on Jean Genet's homoerotic novel, the film was "a chance to prove if I was a man of courage or chickenshit," Davis recalled later.

Davis had become friends with playwright Larry Kramer in the early 1970s after he performed in *Sissy's Scrapbook*, an early play of Kramer's, which, two years later, became a notorious off-broadway flop entitled *Four Friends*. After many well-known leading actors had turned down the autobiographical role of Ned Weeks in *The Normal Heart*, Davis asked to play the part, insisting that he knew Kramer better than anyone else. Because of his roles in *The Normal Heart* and *Querelle*, it was widely assumed that Davis was gay.

"Brad never worried if people thought he was gay or if they didn't think he was gay. He played the roles he wanted to play because they appealed to him on some level," said Blustein.

According to Rodger McFarlane, executive director of Broadway Cares and a close friend, Davis was "one of the rare and gifted actors who was so secure in his masculinity and his love for his wife and daughter that he was absolutely fearless, and brought huge

one or more of whose organs may have been transplanted into the speaker's body—both of whom are at the mercy of a nameless, imperious, moneyed, powerful employer/owner.

A show called *The White of an Egg* featured identical twins Willa and Bo Morrisette in a dark, clever exploration of dependency that crossed *The Twilight Zone* with *Anne of Green Gables*. Two orphaned sisters in look-alike frocks and baby bonnets are searching for their origins. They alternately loathe and love one another and their ping-pong match dialogue goes from the banal to the horrifying. Was one really married to the man that the other loved? Does the other really make the mistake of her life by having a son who turns out to be a monster? This lively show was directed by Andy Curtis, is a member of Calgary's inventive, insouciant company One Yellow Rabbit.

Another duo, two Japanese singers/standup comediennes called Frank Chickens (if Dancenoise has an Asian counterpart, this is it), drew crowds for their rude karaoke take-offs and tell-it-like-it-is versions of international living. ("My husband is great. He has a British passport. Actually, the best thing about him is that I have no idea where he is right now.") The Chickens' manic pastiche of geisha with hard rock bespoke the kind of painful dislocation that can result when two cultures collide at high velocity.

I made the mistake my first evening in Edmonton of responding to a 4-star rating for a play called *Just a Little Fever* in which two women, the wife and mistress of the same man, encounter each other. The bathos that struck the *Edmonton Journal* reviewer as "gutwrenching and honest" conveyed one of the strongest anti-abortion messages I've encountered in years. A destroyed fetus and a dead toddler bring together two women for whom being an artist and a broker are only poor substitutes for motherhood. Another performance, *Pink Smoke in the Vatican—the Mystery of Joan* offered a different view of womanhood. The spunky and vocally adept Naomi Cooke played the 9th- (or 11th-) century pope who was stoned to death when she was delivered of a child during a papal procession.

The most successful play at the Fringe was *Funker Rauch* a fairly straight-forward production of a play written by veteran actor and Obie winner Michael Burrell and directed by Fringe founder Brian Paisley. The piece deals with the experience of the very young Georg Rauch who, before going on to a career as a painter, served in Hitler's army and was decorated despite his Jewish grandparents. His military service, according to the play, was encouraged by his mother to enable her to continue her resistance work. Two actors (the pro-

tean, if mannered, Burrell and young Robert Winslow) simultaneously played the old and the young Rauch in provocatively written and directed scenes. Audiences and critics alike gravitated towards this piece that was serious, featured an identifiable main character with no gender-bending, offered a couple of names, and had a beginning, middle, and end.

And that's the news from Lake Wobegone. I mean Edmonton. I mean North America, that is, the home front. If this is the "fringe," consider what the center is supposed to be. □



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integrity to investigating and developing homoerotic roles." McFarlane's life with Kramer and his co-founding of Gay Men's Health Crisis with the playwright is dramatized in *The Normal Heart*.

Bluestein said that Davis did not seek any treatment for his condition for four years "because of his terror and because of his fear of disclosure." Even after that, she adds, he paid all his medical expenses out of his own pocket because he was wary about the lack of confidentiality when dealing with insurance companies. Eventually, Kramer and McFarlane put him in touch with a network of friends who kept his secret and helped him with medical care and legal assistance.

"On a very quiet and private basis Brad managed to live, and survive, and work for six years," said Bluestein, explaining that it was only in June that Davis became "extremely tired and weary and started to really feel quite ill." Davis had just completed his last acting job, a lead role in *A Habitation of Dragons*, a cable TV film written by Horton Foote and directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, who directed *The Normal Heart*. Davis made his last New York stage appearance in February this year at a staged reading of Larry Kramer's latest play, *The Destiny of Me*, a sequel to *The Normal Heart*. He repeated the role of Ned Weeks who, in the sequel, has AIDS. Ironically, at this reading, the late Colleen Dewhurst played Weeks's mother. It was one of her last stage appearances as well.

**D**avis's wife and friends have gone public with the details of his life in the hope that it may have some positive impact. In his book proposal, Davis wrote, "maybe [this story] could help other families who not only have to live with the terror of this disease, but also with the horrible burden of carrying the great secret." Describing his last days, his wife said that Davis "tried everything he could but he was not responding to medication, and ultimately just couldn't rally."

Says McFarlane: "Brad was a class act. He had lots of depth, lots of fire, he was unbelievably charming and beautiful, well trained, thoroughly experienced and existentially tested." □



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