

# What's So *Paul Rudnick has the* Funny About *answer in his play 'Jeffrey.'* AIDS?

**I**S IT POSSIBLE to laugh at AIDS? New York playwright Paul Rudnick challenges you to do just that in his new play *Jeffrey*. The play, which recently arrived on the West Coast, is a runaway hit in New York where it is likely to celebrate its first anniversary next January.

*Jeffrey* is a series of comic sketches about a man who vows to have no more sex out of fear of AIDS, and then falls in love with an HIV-positive man. A master of the wise-crack, Rudnick keeps the audience in hysterics as his celibate hero scuttles through contemporary gay Manhattan, trying to avoid sex, love and commitment.

The 34-year-old Rudnick spent years establishing himself as a capable writer of comedy. He is the author of two side-splitting novels, *Social Disease*, a satire of the New York club scene, and *I'll Take It*, a hilarious look at compulsive shopping. Rudnick made his Broadway debut with *I Hate Hamlet*, the story of a young soap star who is cast as the troubled Prince of Denmark and is then visited by the ghost of John Barrymore.



But this farce closed abruptly when the actor playing Barrymore used a sword to attack another actor on stage.

Rudnick also wrote the first version of the movie *Sister Act* (for Bette Midler), but took his name off the project when it was completely changed for Whoopi Goldberg. He also did uncredited work on *The Addams Family* and is the sole credited screenwriter on the sequel, *Addams Family Values*.

The future looks very bright for Paul Rudnick. *Addams Family Values* will be released by Paramount at Thanksgiving, and now there's *Jeffrey*.

I talked to Rudnick in New York, a month before the play opened in Los Angeles. He lives in a Greenwich Village apartment that once belonged to actor John Barrymore (which served as his inspiration for *I Hate Hamlet*). Rudnick has decorated his home in the highly theatrical style which distinguishes his writing. Crammed with antiques and Victorian bric-a-brac, you feel like you might be on the stage set for a melodramatic thriller with a title like *Murder At The Manor*.

by Gerard Raymond

How did Jeffrey come about?

*Jeffrey* actually began a year and half ago when I was working on a different play in which there was a supporting character who gave up sex in response to the AIDS crisis. That jumped out at me as such a rich dramatic and comic situation, and also as the essential romantic comedy dilemma of our time. This character wanted his own play. Once I started, it all sort of poured out because there was so much material, so many things that had been accumulating in my mind for the past 10 years.

Isn't this the first time you've written something on a gay-themed subject?

One of the reasons I wrote the play was as a tribute to the gay community, and as a celebration of that community and [its] style. I always had gay characters [in my work] but this was the first time I took the community as the complete subject. And that is such a gift because what a wonderful and theatrically rich group of people you have to deal with.

You have said before that making wisecracks about AIDS could be considered in the worst possible taste. Were you concerned about trivializing the subject through humor?

When I first wrote the play I immediately showed it to friends who are HIV-positive or who had full blown AIDS for a response. What was wonderful was that they were the most supportive group of all. I think that's because sometimes, with the best intentions, people pigeon-hole those with AIDS—[they become] just a red ribbon.

Although caring and compassionate, [people treat PWAs] as if their lives were so limited, in many ways like they are already dead. [PWAs] are certainly denied a full romantic life. I wanted *Jeffrey* to be a very sexy, romantic play in which one partner is HIV-positive. I wanted to avoid portraying victims. It's such a trap and it can get whiny. And most of the people with AIDS refuse to see themselves as victims.

I think a play like *Jeffrey* could never have been written 10 years ago, when the AIDS crisis had just begun. It would have been inappropriate, and impossible because the information wouldn't have been there. But now, 10 years further along, there are all these additional questions aside from the medical crisis. How do we live with this particular nightmare and, especially, how do we achieve any kind of romance or hope for good simple cheer? This was the challenge of the play.

Recent plays have responded to AIDS with anger and espoused a political and activist approach to the crisis.

I think it is absolutely necessary. I consider Larry Kramer a saint. He is a great personal hero of mine. His play [*The Normal Heart*] and ACT UP allow *Jeffrey* to exist. I had written much more political scenes, even an ACT UP scene [in *Jeffrey*] but I found they began to feel like lectures. There is no sense of that in *The Normal Heart* or *Angels in America* because those are wildly theatrical plays and you never feel as if you are at a rally.

But I don't think every gay play should have the burden of addressing every aspect of gay life or every aspect of AIDS. *Jeffrey* shows gay characters leading very complete and hopeful lives in the midst of the AIDS crisis, and that is political in itself. When I wrote it I decided to assume a number of things—that everyone knows AIDS is an unbearably awful disease and that dying from it is hideous. The government's response to the disease and the world's often hideous ignorance of it also strike me as being very evident.

From the opening slide-show montage in the production you deliberately evoke a very enchanting New York. What is the role the city has in Jeffrey?

In a way, *Jeffrey* is a Cershwinn dream of New York. I wanted the play to have this fairy tale romance in the center of it and to use Manhattan for its enchantment in the way Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers have used it, the way Woody Allen has used it. There is a tradition of Manhattan as the romantic kingdom of our time, as long as you get high enough in the building, far from the crack dealers. It's New York as the love capital. It's a wonderful cardboard skyline with a big cartoon moon hanging over it.

You have fun taking potshots at various aspects of the community, like the self-help movement, which is particularly popular with people with HIV. What was the response to this? Did you get any reaction from Marianne Williamson, the famous self-help guru?

In *Jeffrey*, Debra Morehouse, the post-modern evangelist, is based on a whole number of the new style [gurus]. I'm in two minds about them. Sometimes they do an enormous amount of good—Marianne Williamson has helped many people, done fundraising and [set up] food service organizations, which is wonderful.

On the other hand, whenever you have an epidemic, when you have despair, people have a real need for faith. I always get a little suspicious with anyone [who is supposed] to have answers. They usually claim that they don't want a cult and that they are just a mouthpiece, but they are on the stage in front of 10,000 people when they are doing this. I think this is wildly funny because anyone who starts a religion from scratch is going to be making it up as they go along and getting off on it. I haven't had any direct response from Marianne Williamson or any of her colleagues, but sometimes when that character appears in the play and says, "I'm not here as a priest or a guru, I'm just someone who likes to talk," the audience howls because they know who this is and what it is about. I love that, it's such a relief to laugh at this seriousness.

And some of the audience may actually be devotees—

Oh absolutely, they are able to laugh at themselves. In fact, I think if faith or moral answers can't withstand a little laughter you're in big trouble—it means [the faith] wasn't that strong to begin with. So I think satire is best and most fruitfully aimed at the powerful, and the fact that these new age leaders have become very powerful makes them right for this kind of thing. Anyone that successful becomes an ideal comic target. Who am I to resist?

I suppose the randy Catholic priest who tries to pick Jeffrey up in church was also too tempting a target.

The practicing Catholics in the audience go crazy—you hear a big howl and applause. I thought it would be more interesting to show a priest who genuinely wanted to do good, but who was finding that very difficult given the hierarchy of the church and the demands on religious leaders. I didn't want the scene to be Catholic bashing, the priest is also a heroic character and most of what he says I agree with completely. People recognize the basic truth there or they wouldn't be laughing. Just look at the front pages. The Catholic Church is having to deal with what happens when you take a lot of men, put them in dresses and tell them they can't have sex. They are going to find a way. It is such rich comic territory.

How would you answer those people who accuse you of employing gay stereotypes in JEFFREY?

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Shock comedy: Paul Rudnick (center) clowns around with Raul Julia and Anjelica Huston on the set of *Addams Family Values*.

There have been a few critics who felt two of the main characters in the play, an interior designer and his lover, a chorus boy, are inappropriate images for gay characters. I find that attitude so wildly offensive. This is where political correctness can become dangerous because suddenly you are making a list of who you are allowed to have on stage. And those two characters are by far the strongest and sanest people in the play, they are my heroes.

If another writer had written those characters, or if it was 20 years ago, they would have been used just as comic relief; they would have been sneered at and would have been token figures. If you are writing from the inside, from a gay perspective, you find that they are, first of all, very full human beings and that they have genuine strength. I think those people—the interior designers, the florists, the costume designers, pet groomers—who everyone thinks of as the silliest sissies, have done most of the marching, most of the protesting, most of the caregiving. They define the gay world.

So to suddenly ignore them, or act as if they are the Uncle Toms or Aunt Jeminas of the gay world is shocking to me. Gay characters who are as straight as possible are a far more vicious stereotype—a kind of bland, middle-of-the-road, all-American decency, which even straight people aren't like. If I was a straight person I would be offended to be portrayed as that dull! So I think asking to have gays shown as such straight arrows is such a big mistake. And it sure isn't funny.

**Gay characters who are as straight as possible are a vicious stereotype: a bland, all-American decency which even straight people aren't like.**

In an article you wrote recently you referred to the existence of a "gay soul." As a gay writer do you think there is such a thing as gay humor and gay sensibility?

As long as people don't worry it to death. I think there certainly is a gay wit that you can trace from many performers, some who aren't even gay—from an Oscar Wilde to a Noel Coward, a Bette Midler and even to a Robin Williams. It is distinctively gay in terms of being theatrical, in terms of taking a satiric look at just about everything, in terms of real pleasure, style and verbal facility.

The triumph of the wisecrack is just something gay people have developed. They are not all good at it, which is a real danger. Gay people are not automatically funny, witty or stylish and should avoid ever imagining that to be the case. Otherwise you'll be stuck in a awful lot of deadly cocktail parties where people feel a cigarette holder and ascot is enough.

On the other hand, I think [wisecracking is an example of] the way a lot of minorities develop certain life-saving forms, certain methods of celebration, whether it is music, dance, verbal wit, or fashion. Gay soul and gay humor has been a source of great strength for the gay community; the only way to get through 103 memorials is by giggling and cruising.

Jeffrey has this line—when he is confronted by gay-bashers—about humor being his only weapon—

When [the basher] says, "I have a knife, what do you have?" Jeffrey says, "Irony, adjectives and eyebrows." Those don't do much good if you have a gun in your face, but on the other hand, if you don't have them, you are at a complete loss.

Do you think there is a danger of you being typed as a gay playwright?

I think that people can, even with good intentions, pigeonhole you in a way that they don't with a straight writer. No one refers to [David] Mamet or [Sam] Shepard as straight writers or say they only deal with heterosexual themes.

I'm in an interesting position because I have written mainstream films and gay plays and I am approached for both kinds of projects. I would never type myself as any kind of writer and I cannot imagine what I will be writing two years from now. I'd like to stay wide open and I think it is real progress for the gay community when gay and straight writers are free to choose any subject matter, and you are limited only by your own talent and imagination. I am wildly proud to be gay and I assume I will often write gay characters and about gay topics. On the other hand, I will deal with straight characters and issues, and the intersection of all those as well.

Some people have commented that JEFFREY is such a crossover hit because straight audiences expect gays to be funny, that it is safe.



Shirtless wonder: John Michael Higgins plays Jeffrey.

Except I think it is not. Whenever a [general] audience think they are going to see an evening of gay theatre or a gay film they tend to fear that they will have to watch men kiss, or maybe have sex. In most gay projects there tends to be that moment when there is a soap opera organ chord or drum roll and you have the kiss.

So I wanted to have the guys kissing within the first five seconds of the play. There is so much open sexuality and gay romance in *Jeffrey* that far from pandering [to the audience] by saying, Aren't we harmless jesters, it says we are completely sexual, powerful, and very funny people. When you open a play with the entire cast coming out of an enormous bed and having sex with each other, and most of them are men—somehow I can't think of that as a safe route.

I think people accept things in *Jeffrey*, almost without knowing, because it is funny. In that sense it is more subversive than it appears at first. Its homosexuality is a given, it is no way about gay torment and it is not about coming out. Although it is about sorrow about AIDS, it's far more a celebration of gay life and human sexuality and romance. I haven't been to many plays about wild, optimistic gay romances and I am very pleased to have written one.

Do you think that the gay community in New York has gotten over its paralysis from AIDS?

Yes, after 10 years. I think people worried about the medical aspects but also about whether having a good time and parties was okay or whether it was an insult. People have discovered that it is the opposite—the sick are just as eager for romance to continue as anyone else, and that going out dancing doesn't mean you can't march the next day. In fact, those two things support each other, and people realized that it is not only okay but necessary. You can't ask people to stop hugging and kissing for the rest of their lives.

One last thing, can we get personal here? Did you react like Jeffrey did to the AIDS crisis?

In terms of Jeffrey giving up sex? I never went that far. I feel sympathetic, but it was never an option for me. I am far too much of a romantic.

Are you single?

I am seeing a wonderful man right now, a doctor. I put that in to make my mother happy. We have been together four months [as of August, 1993]. In gay years that's practically—well, we should be receiving gold watches and zircon bracelets!

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