

ACTIVISM

Still Angry After All These Years

Larry Kramer Visits Middlebury College BY ERNIE MCLEOD

Say the words "Larry Kramer" in a crowd of gay people old enough to remember the 1980s and you're likely to provoke strong responses. To some, Kramer is the prophet who recognized and spoke the truth about AIDS when most chose to bury their heads in the sand. To others, Kramer is the sex-hating curmudgeon, blinded by a tunnel-vision anger that's outlived its usefulness. Reactions to Larry Kramer sometimes overshadow his accomplishments as a writer and activist.

Kramer was in Vermont recently, participating in a two-evening salute to his life and work at Middlebury College. The first night featured a screening of the 1969 film "Women in Love," which Kramer wrote and produced, based on the D.H. Lawrence novel. After the screening, Kramer discussed the making of the film, now available on DVD with his commentary, including the infamously homoerotic fire-side wrestling match between Alan Bates and Oliver Reed.

The second evening focused on Kramer's activism and creative work since the beginnings of the AIDS crisis. Kramer has been HIV-positive for many years and received a liver transplant in 2001. The program began with a student reading excerpts from Kramer's award-winning 1985 play, "The Normal Heart," which chronicles the fear, ignorance, helplessness, and apathy that defined the plague's early years. "Every word is appli-

cable today," Kramer later noted.

Middlebury College Dean David Edleson then spoke eloquently about what Larry Kramer has meant to him personally and to all of us who have benefited from his activism. Edleson said

After the admiring introduction and a standing ovation from the large crowd in Dana Auditorium, Kramer responded with, "I never know what to say when people say nice things about me."

that Kramer has "saved countless lives by his voice," adding that he thinks people too often focus on Kramer's anger, failing to see the "profound love" behind the rage.

Whatever one might think of Kramer's methods, his importance as an activist can't be disputed. In addition to being a founder of both Gay Men's Health Crisis and, later, ACT UP, Kramer published the now famous 1983 "1,112 and Counting" essay in the "New York Native."

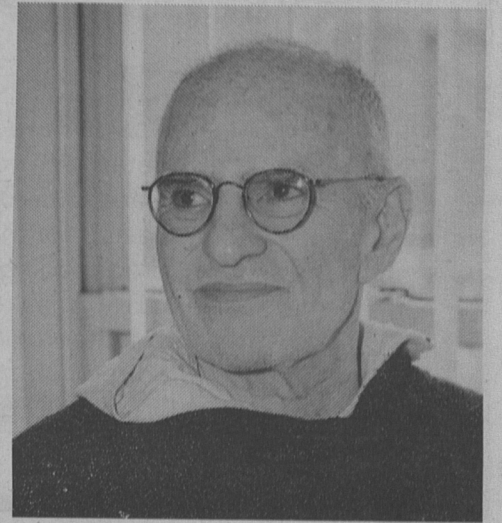
"If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble," Kramer began before lashing out in every possible way at the massive denial surrounding AIDS at that time. The article indeed scared many, and is now considered a turning point in forcing people to wake up to the fact that people were dying and AIDS wasn't going to disappear.

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Once he got over the temporary loss of words, the rest of the evening centered on a speech

no power. We have no place in the social structure of this country." He believes that the country has been "so infiltrated by people who hate us" that it doesn't matter



Kramer delivered five days after the re-election of George W. Bush, titled "The Tragedy of Today's Gays." The speech (published in book form by Penguin last year) is quintessential Kramer: passionate, caring, furious, relentless. Not surprisingly, the Bush administration and the religious right come under scathing attack, but so do most of the rest of us. At several points in the speech he repeats: "I love being gay. I love gay people. I think we're better than other people. I really do. I think we're smarter and more talented and more aware. I do, I do, I totally do. I really do think all of these things. And I try very hard to remember all this." Then he takes us to task again for our passivity, our lack of responsibility.

Regarding the state of gay rights and the gay movement in this country, Kramer offered this assessment: "America has been taken away from us. We have

who the president is. He traces the right wing "cabal" back to a 1971 plan devised by Lewis Powell that emphasizes unified action backed by heavy financing. In other words: they have it, we don't. Whereas some might point to LGBT advancements over the past decades - non-discrimination laws, partnership rights, more effective AIDS treatments, media presence, for example - Kramer believes that "we haven't moved very far at all."







Kramer stressed the need to "find, isolate, and claim our heroes." He puts Abraham Lincoln at the top of this list and points to C.A. Tripp's book "The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln" as a step in the right direction; noting that heterosexual scholars have generally tried to dismiss Tripp's study or any attempts to claim Lincoln as a gay man. "We have to go out and get our history," he told the students, decrying the


current trend towards gender studies, which he writes off as "gobbledygook."

A panel discussion with participation by Middlebury students and faculty followed Kramer's remarks. Kramer's answers to the panel's questions, and to questions from the audience, were as blunt and harsh as his earlier statements. As people searched in vain for glimmers of hope amid his grim prognoses, a pall descended over the room, causing Kramer to joke finally, "I hope everyone isn't going to go home and slit their wrists." He reiterated his conviction that vinegar, not honey, brings about change; citing the ultimate success of ACT UP's confrontational style that's become the model for other activist groups. He separated his "despair at the world" from his currently happy personal life.

Lobbed into the politically correct bubble of academia, Kramer's brutal candor seemed not unlike a detonating bomb. After Kramer's departure from campus, some students spoke of feeling offended, while others felt empowered and inspired to take immediate action. At the end of the day, however, what one thinks of Larry Kramer doesn't really matter, least of all to Kramer himself. What matters is what we do when people like him - if in fact there's anyone else like him - aren't ranting and pointing fingers. Towards the end of the discussion, Kramer was asked what moved him to take action. "I like to fight and just that," he responded. "I love educating myself. I love seeing how awful people are."

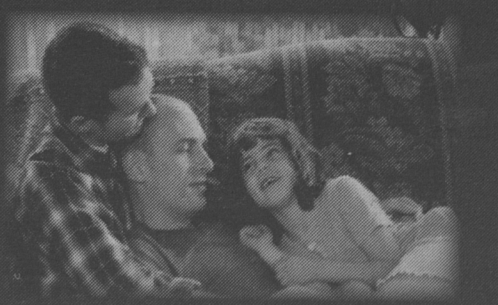
It's easy to disagree with Larry Kramer. Faulting the force of his convictions is more difficult. ▼

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➔ Ernie McLeod writes and photographs in Middlebury and Montréal.