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### **Then and Now: A Study of Radicalism in "The Normal Heart" and "Clit Notes"**

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## Abstract

The goal of social justice theater is to inspire audiences to change the way they think, feel, or act pertaining to an oppressed group. Change is instilled through an assimilationist, radical, or matter of fact style of writing. Radical writing aims to shock and awe audiences, forcing them to acknowledge an issue and encourage them to create positive change. Holly Hughes and Larry Kramer utilize this writing style in their work to call attention to injustices against the LGBTQ community. Hughes's *Clit Notes* and Kramer's *The Normal Heart* were radical works when initially published and contain subject matter warranting them as radical in today's society as well.

## Introduction

Theater is primarily viewed as a form of entertainment. However, the messages present in this art form often transcend mere entertainment value. Social justice theory views theater as a platform for inciting social change. There are three different strategies used in attempts to achieve such a change: assimilation, radical, and matter of fact. Assimilation strives to elicit pity from the audience by asking the oppressors to understand the oppressed. On the other hand, radical takes on an "in your face style" in order to "shake the oppressor into knowledge [and/or] action" about an issue faced by the oppressed (Nadon). The goal here is to shock the audience. Finally, in matter of fact style, the writer depicts the oppressed as not struggling with their oppression. They are normalized in a piece allowing the audience to see what the oppressed would be like in a non-oppressive environment.

In Holly Hughes's performance piece *Clit Notes*, she exemplifies a radical writing style as a means of promoting social change in attitudes towards women, feminism, and lesbianism. Like Hughes, Larry Kramer takes on a radical style in his play, *The Normal Heart*, to shock his audience into social change associated with the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Both plays were written to focus on issues relevant to the time of their composition, but the core theme of each piece still applies to issues in today's society. Regardless of analyzing *Clit Notes* and *The Normal Heart* through a contemporary lens, both pieces still achieve a radical effect on their audience.

## *Clit Notes* Summary

Holly Hughes began performing her work *Clit Notes* in 1993 in Santa Monica, California. However, it was not until three years later in 1996 that *Clit Notes* was published. During its conception, performance, and finally publication, *Clit Notes* reflected the views of the third wave of feminism that was forming in the United States. A key feature brought about by the third wave was intersectionality (Wood 87). Intersectionality allowed lesbian women, like Hughes, to have a greater voice in the feminist activist scene without causing as much controversy as lesbianism had in the second wave. Through narratives of Hughes's life, *Clit Notes* vocalizes progressive thoughts prompting the audience to think about their own views of women and sexuality. She begins by describing her thirteen-year-old self discovering her sexuality. She then jumps ahead to adulthood and explains how her father did not handle her coming out well. Next, Hughes covers three case studies in her life. First, she tells the story of the start of her career as a waitress and lesbian with a passion for feminism. The second case study is a flashback to Hughes's

childhood in a strange story of her passionately kissing her mother. This leads her to the epiphany, “I have a life and it is mine to fuck up” (Hughes 430). Finally, the audience learns how Hughes got started in theater as a punishment for ruining a classmate’s hair with a pair of scissors. As the piece comes to a close, Hughes explains where she is in her life now (439). She is happily in love with her girlfriend despite the hardships they have both faced. However, merely surviving those trying times is not enough, as surviving does not guarantee happiness or safety for queers. The play ends by asking the audience if both out and closeted queers are not safe in today’s world, where are they?

### ***The Normal Heart* Summary**

Published in 1985, Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* is set in the same place it was written, New York City in the early 1980s. The play tells the story of Ned Weeks, a gay man struggling to draw public attention to the outbreak of an unknown disease (AIDS). As Ned fights to gain support from the government, the medical field, his brother, and the gay community, he witnesses acquaintances, friends, and lovers suffer from the disease, or suffer through the emotional toll of losing loved ones. In the end, Ned’s drive to keep fighting for justice cannot save his boyfriend, Felix, as the disease finally consumes him.

The plot reflects what was happening to the gay community in the 1980s with the AIDS epidemic. It was a new disease that had not been studied medically and consequently everyone lacked knowledge of what it was, how it spread, and how to prevent it. The work portrays an array of strong emotions felt at the time by gay men. There was an obvious dread of succumbing to the disease or losing someone close. There was a fear of coming out of the closet and what that could do to a man’s career or life. There were also displays of frustration since no one in power seemed to care about the tragedy occurring. Anger also stemmed from out gay men to closeted ones for not identifying themselves in order to support their community. Undoubtedly, loss is a major theme since there is not one character in the play who is not personally affected by the epidemic in some way.

### **Radical Topics Present**

Wanting to change their audience’s perceptions of what it means to be gay or lesbian, Hughes and Kramer bring up topics that are uncomfortable for many. The audience is forced to pay attention to the content in front of them no matter how uncomfortable it may make them. Death, disease, depression, suicide, self-loathing, and rejection are topics Hughes and Kramer discuss in their work that create a radical tone.

Self-loathing is present in both plays as it pertains to the main character. Hughes is the main character in her own story and opens up about the self-loathing she has due to rejection from society and her family. Kramer’s main character, Ned Weeks, is largely based off of his own actions and beliefs. With audiences easily able to make this connection, the source of Ned’s self-hatred and the degree to which it is felt are at least suspected to be based on Kramer’s own experiences.

In *The Normal Heart*, Ned does not outrightly express his self-loathing, but it is still indicated indirectly through other characters. In an argument at a Gay Men’s Health Crisis meeting, Mickey briefly remarks, “I don’t think Ned likes himself” (Kramer 100). Ned questions Mickey’s remark, but does little to say or indicate that he actually does like himself. As Ned’s

partner, Felix has a more substantial claim to validating his self-loathing based on what he has observed of Ned in their time together. When speaking to Ned's brother, Ben, Felix explains:

FELIX. Well, he blames himself, of course, for everything from my dying to the state of the entire world. . . . He's in terrible shape. He was thrown out of the organization he loved so much. After almost three years he sits at home all day, flagellating himself awfully because he thinks he's failed some essential test. (2.15.21-23; 2.15.28-32)

These observations indicate that Ned may be suffering from depression. This is confirmed at the end of the play when it is revealed that Ned was suicidal. He remarks:

NED. Felix, when they invited me to Gay Week at Yale, they had a dance. . . . In my old college dining hall, just across the campus from that tiny freshman room where I wanted to kill myself because I thought I was the only gay man in the world--they had a dance. (2.16.50-54)

Unlike Kramer, Hughes does not hesitate to outrightly confess that self-loathing is a problem with which she has struggled. She writes from a more comedic standpoint and only intersperses her writing with blunt moments of painful truths. In *Clit Notes*, self-loathing is present as the notion of "shame." When accused of being shameless by her father, Hughes responds with, "I wish I had no shame. Sometimes I think that shame is all I've got" (Hughes 1.1.350-351). Later on she touches on the idea of shame again:

I wish I had no shame.  
Maybe there are shameless queers. But I know that I'm not one of them, and neither is my girlfriend. I know that buried deep in our bodies is the shrapnel of memory dripping a poison called shame.  
But we're the lucky ones. There's not enough shame in us to kill us. Just enough to feel when it rains. . . .  
What my girlfriend and I are good at is acting shameless. (1.682-687; 697)

This explicitly indicates that Hughes has struggled with her mental well-being. There is no guesswork involved as to whether or not she has suffered psychologically from the homophobic words and action of others. What is also key to this passage is Hughes's inclusiveness of the queer community. She remarks that she is not shameless, her girlfriend is not shameless, and only maybe are some queers shameless but she is not aware of any who are. She touches on suicide more lightly than Kramer in this passage, but the fact that she even mentions it speaks to the tragic prevalence suicide has had in the queer community.

These moments of self-loathing are radical because in the 1980s and 1990s there was still a large stigma around not only homosexuality, but mental health issues as well. Self-loathing, depression, and suicide were not topics comfortably talked about around the dinner table. Discussing multiple controversial topics at once definitely elevated the radical status of *Clit Notes* and *The Normal Heart*.

## ***Clit Notes* Historical Context**

When *Clit Notes* was first published, Hughes already had controversy and radicalism associated with her name. In 1990, Hughes was one of four artists denied funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Hughes, along with Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Karen Finley, became known as the NEA Four. The artists were denied funding based on a “decency clause” passed by Congress. This clause allowed the NEA to allocate funds based on the subject matter of the art. Due to the presence of LGBTQ and feminist themes as well as the use of live nudity, the four artists’ work was deemed indecent (Clements). *Clit Notes* was Hughes’s first produced work since her rejection from NEA which made the public all the more eager to see her supposed lack of decency (Stayton).

Stayton’s 1993 review of *Clit Notes* for the *Los Angeles Times* agreed that Hughes benefitted from the radical aura in which the NEA helped veil her. However, the NEA was not the only source of radicalism; Hughes herself was. The review mentions dialogue lacking from the published version of *Clit Notes*. The review also discusses how, in one of her early performances, Hughes began by impersonating conservative commentator William F. Buckley and introducing herself as an “alleged performance artist.” This was followed by mocking former NEA chairman John E. Frohnmeyer’s comments: “Holly Hughes is a lesbian. Her work is heavily of that genre.” These satirical remarks are not the only bit of radicalism played upon in Hughes’ performance. Stayton attributes Hughes’s success to her use and performance of emotion writing that her “harrowing and hilarious confessions” are “expressed with an emotional honesty that transcends conventional theater. ... Holly Hughes carries heavy baggage [onto the stage]. You don’t see it. You feel it” (Stayton).

## ***The Normal Heart* Historical Context**

The *Los Angeles Times* (Sullivan) also reviewed a local production of *The Normal Heart* calling it “an angry play” written by “an angry man.” However, this anger is not condoned by the article, but validated. Sullivan agrees with Kramer that too many people “failed to respond accurately to the AIDS threat three or four years ago, when its gravity should have been clear.” The simple description of the character Ned Weeks as “fanatic” also confirms the radicalism of the play. Ironically, as one of the organizations criticized in the novel, *The New York Times* also published a review of Kramer’s play following its release. Noting that it did contain “powerful vignettes,” the review commends Kramer for making “no attempt to sanitize AIDS; the scenes featuring the disease’s suffering victims are harrowing.” This attests to Kramer’s radicalism noting that “there can be little doubt that *The Normal Heart* is the most outspoken play around” (Rich).

## **Interpretation through a Modern Lens**

Reading these plays for the first time in 2016 offered a different viewpoint than reading them in the year of publication. Hindsight, in addition to the current state of the LGBTQ community, creates a unique reading of the plays through a contemporary lens. Topics covered by Hughes and Kramer have different associations now than they did at the time of publication. However, current research on the LGBTQ community offers some insight that accentuates radical messages present in the texts.

For instance, Hughes and Kramer both write about how their families reacted to their coming out. Hughes compares it to her father becoming ill:

Just because you lose a kidney, that's no reason to think you can't have a normal life.  
If you go for that sort of thing.

Funny but this was exactly the same though my father had when he first found out that I was a lesbian. ... I knew he figures he had two daughters. So he lost one. Big deal. It wouldn't kill him. Plenty of people do fine on just one. (1.1.123-128; 1.1.130-132)

When her father's diagnosis worsens to cancer, so too does Hughes's analogy between his illness and his opinion of her:

[I]f this is what the doctors have promised, if this is really the *good* cancer at last, then it's bound to eat most of my father's marriage to my mother. Their terrible fights. The silences which were worse.

Until the cancer gets to the worst thing of all.

Until it gets to that thing that my father says is what's really killing him. Anybody want to take a guess what is the worst thing that ever happened to my father?

You're looking at her. (1.1.328-336)

Kramer portrays familial rejection in a scene between Ned and Ben discussing their history:

BEN: Are you suggesting it was wrong of me to send you into therapy so young? I didn't think you'd stay in it forever.

NED: I didn't think I'd done anything wrong until you send me into it. (1.6.115-119)

While Hughes takes on a humorous, sarcastic tone to elicit shock from the audience, Kramer takes a more direct route. Regardless of how it happens or how it is coped with, anyone can understand that rejection, especially from family, hurts. A contemporary interpretation allows readers to understand at greater depth how this rejection can be particularly harmful to members of the LGBTQ community. Articles from the *American Academy of Pediatrics* and the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* confirm what today's society already knows: for LGBTQ young adults, rejection from family increases the likelihood of depression and attempting suicide (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez 346; Needham & Austin 1189). With this current frame of reference in mind, it makes perfect sense to new audiences why Ned was suicidal and why Hughes struggled with feeling ashamed of her sexuality.

A contemporary frame of reference also makes *The Normal Heart* and *Clit Notes* radical in their own right. There are adults today who were not alive when the latter of these plays was published in 1996. They are not old enough to remember the AIDS crisis or the start of third wave feminism, they have learned about those subjects in school as part of history classes. For these young adults, what is shocking about these plays is the lack of support for the LGBTQ community. Today, high schools have gay-straight alliance groups, and college campuses are proudly home to pride organizations. Millions of people from all walks of life have actively voiced their support through initiatives like the It Gets Better Project. Celebrities are now celebrated for coming out and same-sex marriage is legal. When Kramer and Hughes were growing up and writing these stories, almost none of those types of supportive organizations

existed. For young LGBTQ adults reading these plays today, the world Kramer and Hughes lived in sounds like hell. However, it is only experiencing this hell that has inspired the LGBTQ community to fight for progress.

Regardless of the progress that has been made, some of the radical content present in these pieces is still radical for the initial reasons previously mentioned. Queerness, HIV/AIDS, depression, and suicide still have immense stigma surrounding them. LGBTQ people suffer from depression at higher rates than heterosexuals. LGBTQ adults are more at risk for suicidal behaviors than heterosexual adults with higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders as well. Notably, issues in LGBTQ adults are most often caused by discrimination and victimization faced in their childhood and adolescent years (Kerr). The stigma surrounding people with HIV can result in “loss of income and livelihood, loss of marriage and childbearing options, poor care within the health sector, withdrawal of caregiving in the home, loss of hope and feelings of worthlessness, and loss of reputation” (Ogden & Nyblade 26).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the changing times, the original legacy of radicalism in these plays lives on. Both pieces are still being printed, sold, and performed. Hughes still willingly interviews about and performs selections from *Clit Notes*. *The Normal Heart* was brought back into the modern eye through both a 2011 revival on Broadway and a 2014 TV movie version where both productions featured notable openly gay actors. This added context for current audiences enhances already radical content making these two plays ones that have, and will, stand the test of time.

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