

Review

THE NORMAL HEART

CABELL - Full Ticket
BAILLIE - 3/4 Ticket

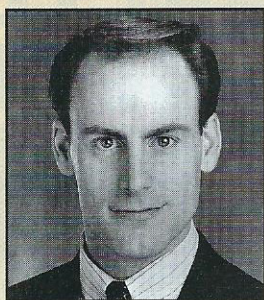
CABELL:

There is nothing normal about The Alchemy Theatre Company's production of *The Normal Heart*. Finely directed by Robert Saxner at the Center Stage, 48 W. 21st Street. I have never seen a Larry Kramer play. I was not prepared for the raw emotional power of the piece. Seldom does an author pen at least one, truly fine, gut wrenching monologue. Mr. Kramer has penned five astonishing individual scenes for this more than worthy cast. They use them to wrench hearts and twist tears out of the audience. The play, I believe, is based on Larry Kramer's life and his struggles to found the GMHC. Tom Paitson Kelly portrays the author under the pseudonym of Ned Weeks. Mr. Kelly drove the play and its characters with the force and energy of a cattle prod. He energizes, punctuates, corrals and manipulates his fellow friends to face this epidemic that no one wanted to acknowledge. Mr. Kelly has the skill to pull back at just the right moment, to be insecure, or charmingly inept at courtship, then heartbroken by death. His at-long-last love Felix, too soon lost, portrayed by Scott Galbraith, gave the kind of strength and grace to his role that directors look for in an actor and people look for in a mate. Ed Carlo, as Ned's pal Mickey, reminds me of so many great friends lost. His breakdown monologue in Act Two leaves you trembling inside. The surprise of the evening was Richard Lear, who portrayed the ex-green beret turned Citibank Executive VP who is paranoid of the "Gay" label and has lost three lovers to AIDS. As the group's president, he is dedicated and trapped in an organization that personifies what he is trying to avoid. "Gay politics, gay awareness, gay proclamation." At first one thinks he was merely cast for his looks, and deservedly so. He seems too conservative, too emotionally constrained to be an interesting character. Then in Act Two, his speech of the last journey home with his dying lover is the most terrifying, heart wrenching moment in the show. Chet Carlin, as Ned Weeks' straight conservative lawyer brother Ben, is perfection as the sibling who loves and understands - yet never truly, until the journey's end. And Kate Levy's portrayal of the polio-ridden, wheelchair bound, AIDS-pioneering Dr. Emma Brookner, goads and empowers Ned to "WAKE PEOPLE UP ABOUT AIDS". Levy's performance is as miraculous as the character she portrays. *The Normal Heart* is not for the weak at heart. But what good theatre is?

BAILLIE:

This play cannot be performed too much. No matter often I see it, it is powerful, moving and frustrating. AIDS is everpresent in our lives and Larry Kramer's play about its early days is as powerful as ever. At first I felt this 'Wake Up call' (as Robert says) needs to be done outside of NYC, San Francisco, Chicago, etc. Most of us in NYC have been dealing with this long before the rest of the world, and they are preaching to the choir. But, unsafe sex is on the rise and maybe a reminder is necessary. All that aside, this is a very strong production, with very poor production values. The play is so commanding that the squeaky panels, the terrible sight lines, the folding chairs are forgivable. A major scene between Felix and Ned in the first act was lost to many because it was staged on the floor. Otherwise, the direction by Robert Saxner was smooth and seamless. Robert's comments on the individual performances are right on target. Tom Paitson Kelly captured the frustration, anger and determination of Ned Weeks, I just wish he didn't always find it at the top of his lungs. Two performances which do not add to the production are Larry Purifory and Chet Carlin who seem to have trouble remembering their lines. The others, and especially Tom Paitson Kelly, turn in performances so charged and focused that it is hard to believe they are acting.

If you have never seen *The Normal Heart*, this is your chance. Take someone whose hand you can hold, or better yet, take someone who needs a swift kick into reality.



Courtesy of KPM Associates

JUNE MOON

CABELL - 3/4 Ticket
BAILLIE - Full Ticket

CABELL:

June Moon is not so much a great play as it is a great production. A revival of one of George S. Kaufman's collaborations with Ring Lardner, it is dialogue-heavy and slow moving at times, yet all that is more than compensated by the quirky casting, zesty characterizations, fine ensemble direction and top notch performances by a razor sharp cast. Albert Macklin as the pint-sized, pistol wit reincarnate of Nole Coward is terrific. He breezes in during the second scene and packs the show with the energy and drive it lacks until that time. Justin Kirk is a veritable chameleon as an actor. Taking leaps of a blind faith from *Love! Valor! Compassion!* to this nerdy wannabe outta-towner who conquers the Big City and Tin Pan Alley armed with a mouth full of malapropos and a train full of naiveté. His characterization from head to toe is in perfect sync with his destined love Edna, played in total adoration by Jessica Stone. Ms. Stone is wide-eyed, quirky and completely adorable in the role. Cynthia Nixon as Lucille, the chorus girl with a heart of tin, is played with bravado and Joan Blondel worldliness. Never too naughty and never too nice. Mario Cantone is a delightful touch to the show and on the piano as the window washer. Robert Joy as Paul Sears

and Tasha Lawrence as his Missus, give strong 'make 'em laugh make 'em cry' performances as the musical partners in crime, while Robert Ari as Mr. Hart and Amy Hohn as Goldie smack with show biz savvy, and Mario Cantone is paranoid and zany as Benny Fox. If you want a smack of nostalgia, skip Lucille and Ethel for one night and see *June Moon*.

BAILLIE:

If George S. Kaufman went to the Variety Arts Theatre and saw *June Moon* he would be delighted. Kaufman and Ring Lardner wrote a charming, funny piece about a yokel lyricist from Schenectady who comes to NYC to make his fortune. Accomplished director Mark Nelson takes a sparkling ensemble and brings life to this simple play. Unlike Robert, I did not find it slow at all, in fact the 45-minute first act was over before I had time to take my shoes off. These could easily have been cookie cutter caricatures, but they were not. Justin Kirk (Fred) is a young Cary Grant. He can play the charming, smooth gentleman and then turn around and be the geek from Schenectady. Edna, the girl he meets on the train, is his soul mate. Jessica Stone takes this husband-hungry girl and could even make a confirmed bachelor run for cover. Robert Joy is Paul, the down-on-his-luck songwriter looking for a hit, but happy in his marriage. His Myrna Loy-like wife is beautifully played by Tasha Lawrence (Lucille). Powerhouse Cynthia Nixon (Eileen) is the gold-digging flapper, who opens Fred's eyes, pants and wallet. She also pushes Lucille into an affair which has disastrous results. A girl with a great outside, but a rotten core. Albert Macklin, an *Obie* winner, is impeccable as Maxie. If this was a movie he would be the narrator. He doesn't say much, but when he does he is dangerous. Mario Cantone takes charge whenever he walks onto the stage. Robert Ari, Amy Horn and Bruce Coyle round out the ensemble. Setting the period are Jonathan C. Bixby's delightful costumes and Bill Clarke's imaginative sets. *June Moon* is definitely a full moon which is shining up the Variety Arts theatre.

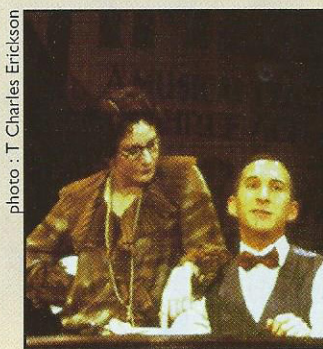


photo: T Charles Erickson