

SPRING A&E GUIDE

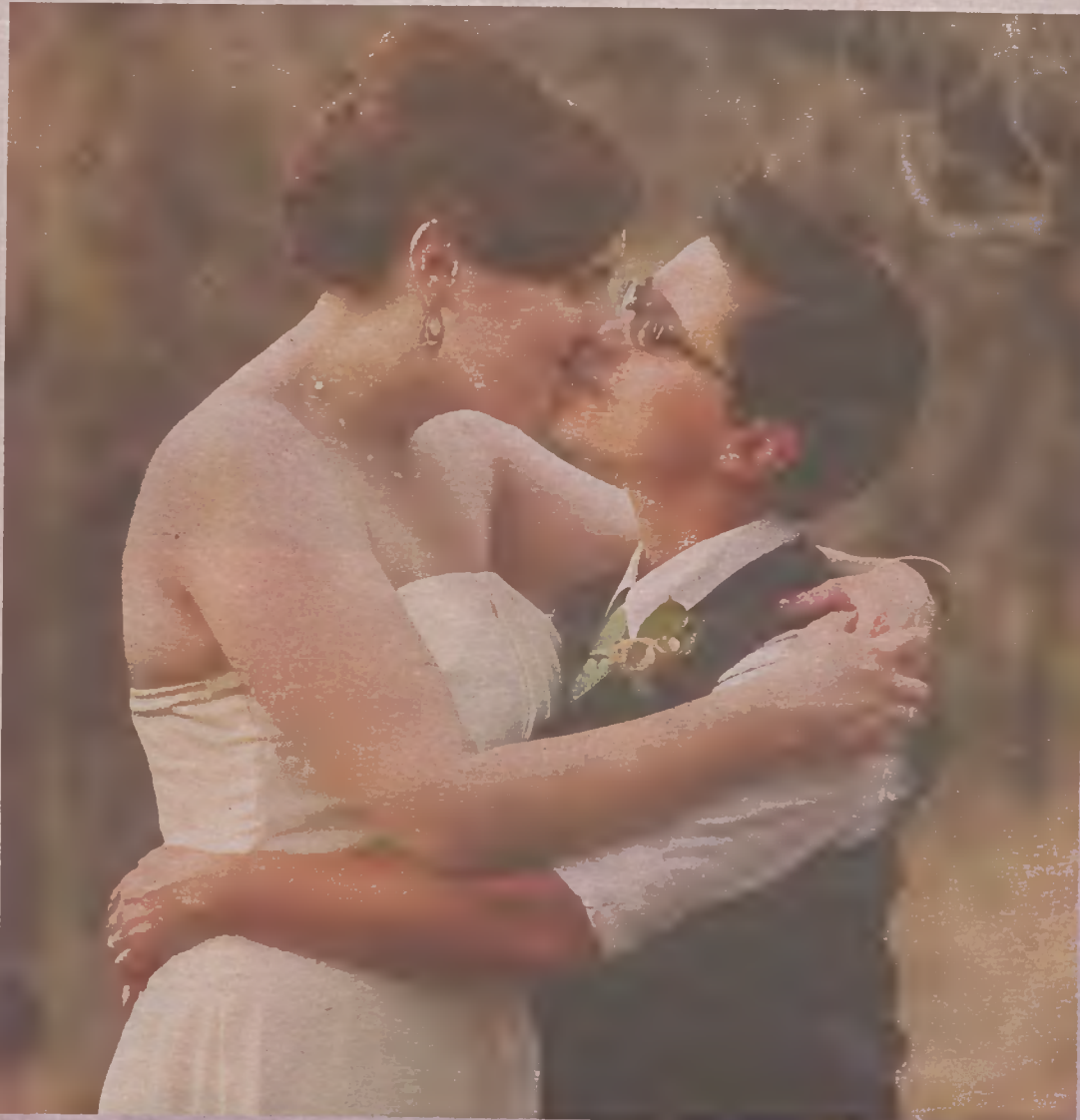
Theatre Charlotte presents
'The Normal Heart'

Iconic play gets first full production in Charlotte

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

Larry Kramer's iconic autobiographical play, "The Normal Heart," has been gracing stages for 30 years. Off Broadway performances, a short run on Broadway and last May's HBO film adaptation — the screenplay adapted by Kramer himself — have all given the play a cult following and garnered it Tony and Emmy awards.

But a full production of the play itself has never come to Charlotte. This March and April, Theatre Charlotte, the city's oldest community theatre, changes that.



The cast of Theatre Charlotte's 'The Normal Heart.' Standing (L-R): Brandon James (Felix Turner), Tommy Foster (Ned Weeks), James Schmitt (Hiram Keehler; Doctor), Jonathan Desamero (David). Seated (L-R): Paul Riley (Bruce Niles), Cynthia Farbman Harris (Dr. Emma Brookner), Matt Mitchell (Craig Donnor, Grady), Frank Dominguez (Ben Weeks), Chris Chandler (Mickey Marcus), Jonathan Ewart (Tommy Boatwright).

"The fact that we're doing it in Charlotte is exciting to me," says director Dennis Delamar, who thinks the recent attention on the body of work, like last year's TV film, will intrigue those who want to see a live version.

"I was worried the film might hinder attendance," Delamar says. "I think more than anything, it educated people that it's out there and hopefully they will be fascinated to see a stage production. There's nothing like a live theatre performance. It's a different piece of art than a movie. The movie is powerful. So is the play."

Written in 1985, the play takes place the years between 1981 and 1984, the earliest days of the AIDS Crisis. It's set in New York City, one of the early epicenters of the epidemic that ravaged the gay community. Much of the play is autobiographical. Main character Ned Weeks is the founder of a prominent HIV advocacy group. Playwright Kramer found himself taking up the mantle of LGBT rights and HIV/AIDS activist at the same time, co-founding New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis, one of the earliest AIDS service and advocacy groups.

In the play, Ned (played by Charlotte's Tommy Foster), like Kramer, takes a more outspoken approach to raising awareness to HIV. Preferring public confrontation and protest, Ned's strategies clash with the calmer approaches preferred by his several friends and lover Felix Turner (Brandon James).

The play documents an important slice of gay and American history. And it attracts older audience members who lived through the time and might have experienced it along with younger audiences who are just now learning about the Crisis, Delamar says.

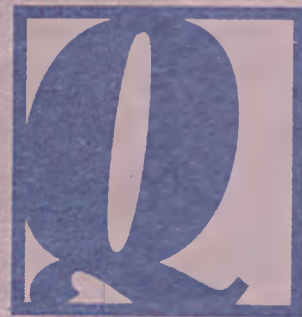
"It attracts people who lived through it. People who lost loved ones," Delamar stresses. "But it also attracts this whole new, young audience which is learning a history they didn't know really existed. It's a very important thing to keep that history alive for young people, to know where the struggles started. This play brings it home."

And in the midst of the history, the drama and the politics, there's also love and friendship.

"It's also a love story and that is so important to get audiences so invested in these characters," Delamar says.

Delamar thinks audience members will find the play moving and touching. Personally, he thinks it's one of the best plays ever written.

"Always as a director, I look for fine writing and this is beautifully written," he says. ::



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'The Normal Heart'

Written by Larry Kramer

Directed by Dennis Delamar

Presented by Different Roads Home

March 20-April 4, Various times

Theatre Charlotte

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\$27, 704-372-1000, carolinatix.org

theatrecharlotte.org

Recommended for ages 17+