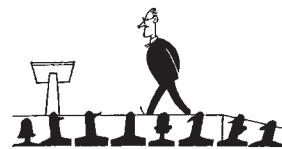

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NOWHERE



Larry Kramer delivered a long and fiery speech at Cooper Union last Sunday night. That, of course, was nothing new. Kramer, the playwright who founded the activist group ACT UP

and was the signature voice of the age of AIDS, is famous for his fury: once, he and thousands of his supporters invaded St. Patrick's Cathedral during Mass; another time, they wrapped Jesse Helms's house in a giant yellow condom. Over the years, they hounded pharmaceutical companies and the government into developing and providing drugs and treatments.

In the early days of AIDS, straight people disliked Kramer for his aggressive honesty and gays ridiculed him for what they saw as his prissiness about sex, but now, at sixty-nine, he seems to have outlived the animosity of both groups. He has also outlived almost all of his friends. "It's funny," the playwright Tony Kushner said recently. "These days, audiences are fond of Larry. They seem wistful. Can you imagine that? Being wistful about Larry?"

Kramer surprises people who have seen him screeching on television or have read one of his radioactive e-mails. In conversation, he tends to speak so softly that one has to lean in to hear him. At Cooper Union, Kramer wore his usual uniform: overalls and a sweater with an American flag on it, over a red turtleneck. He looked stooped, old. He spoke for more than an hour, at the same lectern that Abraham Lincoln (who Kramer ceaselessly insists was gay) used when he addressed New Yorkers, in 1860. On Sunday night, the Great Hall was full; hundreds of people were turned away.

The speech, entitled "The Tragedy of Today's Gays," began with a dire assessment of the Presidential election. "I hope we all realize that, as of November 2nd, gay rights are officially dead," Kramer said. "And that from here on we are going to be led even closer to the guillotine. Almost sixty million people whom we live and work with every day think we are immoral. 'Moral values' was at the top of many lists of why people supported George Bush. Not Iraq. Not the economy. Not terrorism. 'Moral values.' In case you need a translation, that means us."

But Kramer has never been harder on others than he has been on homosexuals themselves. It is the main reason that he has occasionally been dismissed as a febrile modern version of Cotton Mather. "I know many people look to me for answers," he went on. "Perhaps

that is why many of you are here. You want answers? We're living in pig shit, and it's up to each one of us to figure out how to get out of it." By pig shit, he meant, more or less, a heedless life of unprotected sex and crystal-meth addiction. "It takes hard work to behave like an adult," he continued. "It takes discipline. You want it to be simple. It isn't simple. Yes, it is. Grow up. Behave responsibly. Fight for your rights. Take care of yourself and each other. These are the answers. It takes courage to live."

He went on, "Does it occur to you that we brought this plague of AIDS upon ourselves? I know I am getting into dangerous waters here, but it is time. With the cabal breathing even more murderously down our backs, it is time. And you are still doing it: you are still murdering each other. . . . From the very first moment we were told, in 1981, that the suspected cause was a virus, gay men have refused to accept responsibility for choosing not to listen, and, starting in 1984, when we were told it definitely was a virus, this behavior turned murderous."

A few weeks earlier, there had been a tribute to Kramer at the 92nd Street Y, produced by Kushner. On that evening, actors read from Kramer's novel "Faggots," from his plays "The Normal Heart" and "The Destiny of Me," and from other works, including his prescient 1983 essay "1,112 and Counting," in which he asked, incredulously, how many more people would have to die before gays got serious about AIDS. That was, roughly, seventy million infections ago.

"I guess if you live long enough people give up and accept you," Kramer said that night, with something approaching giddiness. "I got invited to the National Cancer Institute, to a conference that is so high-level I don't even understand the topics. And Harvard just called."

Kramer understands, however, that acceptance doesn't mean much, in the scheme of things, since it seems not to extend to gay people in general. "Nobody listens to us," Kramer said at Cooper Union. "There is not a single person in Washington who will get us or give us anything but shit and more shit. I'm sorry. This is where we are now. Nowhere."

—Michael Specter