



The *Normal* suspects: The cast of *The Normal Heart*, which opens August 11, includes (clockwise, from top) Robert Martinez, Joseph Zollers, Wes Copeland, Lance Marshall, Steve Bullitt, Ryan Thomas Heitzman, Brett Cullum, Sage Holli Bara, and Glen Fillmore.

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REDEFINING

More than 20 years ago, The Normal Heart confronted the early years of the AIDS crisis. Now Joe Watts revives Larry Kramer's groundbreaking play to reach a new generation touched by the epidemic

by Nancy Ford • Photograph by John Taton

In 1985, Houston mayoral candidate Louis Welch didn't realize his microphone was on when he offered this callous cure for AIDS: "Shoot the queers!"

Welch (who had already served as mayor from 1963 to 1974) was defeated in his run by the incumbent, Kathy Whitmire, but his comment was representative of the insensitivity surrounding the growing epidemic in that era.

That same year, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* did much to begin countering that insensitivity, starting as many social trends do—in the theater. The play, the first to address the growing AIDS crisis in the United States, was hailed as "extraordinary" and "outspoken" by critics when it was introduced to New York audiences.

"No one who cares about the future of the human race can afford to miss *The Normal Heart*," theater critic Rex Reed wrote at the time.

More than 20 years after its New York debut, Theatre New West artistic director Joe Watts is presenting *The Normal Heart* in Houston. His production opens August 11 at Bering & James, a beautiful new gallery space in Montrose.

"In the summer of 1985 I saw the original production of *The Normal Heart* at Joe Papp's Public Theatre in New York," Watts says. "It was a life-changing experience for me. Its brilliance has haunted me ever since. I knew one day I would have to produce and direct this play."

After receiving critical acclaim last fall for his production of *Bent* at Holocaust Museum Houston, Watts began asking himself if this were the right time for a revival of Kramer's play: Would there be an audience, or was the work too dated and too depressing? Wasn't its message about practicing safe sex a worthy one? Wasn't reaching out to a whole new segment of the community, while serving as a reminder to others, also valid?

As Watts pondered these questions, an onslaught of media focused on the 25th anniversary of the identification of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

"There was a *Newsweek* cover story, 'The New Face of AIDS,' followed by a PBS four-hour *Frontline* documentary called *The Age of AIDS*. Then, on June 2, first lady Laura Bush gave a positive speech to the United Nations General Assembly about the AIDS campaign," Watts says.

"I knew all this, coming after my decision to produce this play, was an omen and confirmation, that I had, indeed, and absolutely, chosen just the right time."

The Normal Heart will be performed through September 30.

ON THE WEB: Read an excerpt from *The Normal Heart* at www.outsmartmagazine.com.

'NORMAL'