Atlanta's Curtain Call: AIDS Activism on the Southern Stage

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Atlanta's Curtain Call: AIDS Activism on the Southern Stage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for \textit{High Honors} (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 24, 2019
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Throughout the 1980s, gay theatre changed profoundly as this relatively new genre morphed to grapple with the continuing destruction wrought by the AIDS Crisis and its subsequent gentrification. First generation AIDS plays memorialize deceased AIDS victims and provide education or exposure to the grief and gravity of AIDS. Second generation AIDS plays shifted focus to provide accessible avenues into AIDS activism intended to remedy communal heartache. The most recognizable iterations of both subgenres – *As Is* (1985) and *Angels in America* (1991), for instance – portray the epidemic from a discernably northern perspective. Before white gay men assumed center stage, Rebecca Ranson (a southern lesbian playwright) lamented her departed friend by composing a groundbreaking theatrical production: *Warren* (1984). This thesis closely examines two Ranson works, *Warren* (1984) and *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS* (1988), to chart the distinctly southern arc from first generation individual mourning to second generation communal grief and activism.
INTRODUCTION

Public health is paramount to personal safety and national security, yet the general perception of one of the most detrimental epidemics in recent history seems all but apathetic. Between 1981 and 1992, the AIDS Crisis claimed the lives of over 200,000 men, women, and children as media outlets and elected officials focused on nuclear threats grounded in Cold War anxieties.¹ National news coverage of AIDS was rarely sympathetic, settling on the grotesque discourses of “innocent victims” and those who “got what they deserved.”² Masses of Americans had their first sympathetic exposure to AIDS through the entertainment industry. The Normal Heart’s (1985) beloved cast, a young man’s funeral planning on Designing Women (1987), panic-stricken Rose on The Golden Girls (1990), and hospitalized Tom Hanks in Philadelphia (1993) all served as vehicles to public empathy. Many of these instances of popular culture recognition depict a particularly northern experience even if set in the South. Meanwhile, the South portrayed and grappled with the AIDS Crisis through a unique lens fixated on appreciable, distinctly southern characteristics: hospitable family values, grassroots theatre movements, and an ongoing struggle with political censorship of gay media and the expressions of people with AIDS (PWAs).³ After AIDS narratives migrated north, the neglect and rejection of the sick and suffering in the South became perhaps one of the most daunting aspects of the AIDS Crisis. Thus, one of the aims of this project is remembrance and the ongoing exposure of those whose stories, although fostered in arduous resilience, remain untouched by historical and current narratives.

To accomplish this, there must exist a mutually-understood, articulable framework of what qualifies as “southern” AIDS media. However, delineating traits exclusive to the South has been a historical hurdle as long as there has been “Southern History.” Historian John B. Boles agrees:

Any prospective reader…might expect a certain consensus of viewpoints, a commonly accepted definition of the region, or even general agreement about the South’s past, if not its future. …No single conclusion, no mutually accepted point of view emerges. What the South is, whether it is persisting as a distinct region or vanishing into a great homogenous American culture, or whether that “loss” should be applauded, regretted, or prevented by some intellectual cardiopulmonary contraption, remains a riddle that different individuals answer differently.4

Nevertheless, numerous southern historians, scholars, politicians, and socialites have attempted to resolve this seemingly straightforward question. Thomas Jefferson describes the South as the definite antithesis to the North. While the North is “cool,” “laborious,” “chicaning,” and “superstitious,” the South is “fiery,” “indolent,” “candid,” and “without attachment or pretensions to any religion but that of the heart;” Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham would certainly disagree.5 Others tend to define the region geographically, delimiting the South to the constrained boundaries of the Confederate States of America (and perhaps portions of the border states, notably Kentucky).6 While intuitive, this definition suffers tremendously in defining media portrayals of the South.

Consider a play set in the heart of San Francisco detailing a PWA relegated to the San Francisco AIDS Ward. This particular PWA hails from Tennessee, cooks Cajun food, and speaks with a genuine southern accent. Are these elements sufficient to deem this play “southern?”

Expounding on the previous premise, assume that the show’s initial staging occurred in a local theatre in the heart of Atlanta and received the direct endorsement of the Atlanta-based Centers

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4 John B. Boles, *Dixie Dateline: A Journalistic Portrait of the Contemporary South* (Houston, TX: Rice University Studies, 1983), ii.
5 Boles, *Dixie Dateline*, iii.
for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It seems reasonable to deem this hypothetical performance an unequivocally southern play. However, if this play were reproduced in San Francisco, Chicago, or New York City, would it retain its “southern” identity solely based on its origins? If actors and directors in these renditions employ affected southern accents, substitute Cajun cooking for thin-crust or deep-dish pizza, and omit references to the protagonist’s home state of Tennessee to pay homage to local PWAs in California, Illinois, or New York, the play’s identity as a southern work seems diminished, if not lost entirely. There is an undeniable, albeit ambiguous, cultural perception of the South that renders a purely geographic groundwork for defining southern media insufficient.

Deriving wisdom from analogous cultural-studies realms, southern identity manifests itself in the intuitive conceptions thereof. In attempting to define gay male culture, David Halperin concludes, “the objects of cultural studies are maddeningly difficult to analyze. The simplest of them condense a long history as well as a vast and complex range of interconnected meanings, meanings embodied in and inseparable from their very form or style.” His recent book How to Be Gay supplies readers a set of conceptual tools for identifying cultural identity. One particularly illuminating example was the use of a line from Aida in an announcement of an upcoming competition at his gay gym:

The fact that the supporters of this team can cheer their athletes on by using this reference to Aida implies that they share, or that they can be presumed to share a common set of social practices and cultural understandings distinctive to gay men. The allusion to Aida thereby serves to consolidate the identity of the members of the gym as belonging to a particular social group – a group composed of gay men – which subscribes to a particular, typical, or stereotypical, culture.  

Put simply, something is “gay culture” because people say it is given that a critical mass of “gays” recognize it as such. Likewise, southern identity conforms to the societal perceptions

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8 Halperin, How to Be Gay, 374.
attributed to it at a given instance. Preparing jambalaya incites nostalgic feelings connected to Mardi Gras celebrations; Civil Rights memorials lend themselves to a distinct past in Birmingham; religious fundamentalism resides predominantly in an area to which it is inseparable, despite its pervasive nature; and while a strong familial tradition may not be exclusive to the South, the impression of family reunions at Georgia barbeques provoke unique sentiments confined to the region by something more compelling than mere geographic coincidence.

Investigating and explaining every facet of southern identity in AIDS plays, however, would prove exceedingly tedious, if not entirely infeasible. This project will not provide a comprehensive overview of southern AIDS culture, nor does it purport the ability to aptly compile one at all because of the unique cultural destruction wrought by the virus and homophobia. Instead, this project implements an imperfect yet practical structure to its examination of southern AIDS media, namely theatrical productions originating in Atlanta by lesbian playwright Rebecca Ranson. This project argues for the importance of Ranson’s first AIDS play, *Warren* (1984) as well as her next major work, *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS* (1988). They stood at the forefront of AIDS theatre, stubbornly resisting the gentrification of the LGBT culture industry as they provide a perspective of distinctive – though not wholly unique – ways that southerners experienced the crisis.

Several individuals who succumbed to the virus live on through memoirs, cherished mementos, and theatre. In the South, playwrights such as Rebecca Ranson expressed personal grief through entertainment, thereby facilitating collective grief. Her magnum opus, *Warren*, details the death of her titular friend and the subsequent emotional fallout in a markedly southern setting. For instance, the lead character’s parents exemplify an archetypal Tennessee couple – their seemingly innocuous southern drawl and courteous personalities mask a sharp disdain of
their son’s sexuality. Ranson’s deliberate depiction of these characters as southern stereotypes discussing Cajun cooking in thick accents melds her Atlanta heritage with questions of acceptance, fear, death, and loss inherent in the AIDS crisis.

*Warren* is a raw and gritty rendition of what became an all too familiar plot: a young, white man’s struggle with and death from AIDS in 1983. However, *Warren*’s compelling cast of characters seamlessly captivated the hearts of numerous audiences in local theatres across the country and functioned as a fundraiser for myriad AIDS service organizations. The lead – Warren Johnston – exudes charisma, candor, joy, and most importantly, humanity. By travelling from her home in Atlanta to San Francisco and spending time on Ward 5B and interviewing healthcare workers, patients, and Warren’s surviving friends to craft her narrative, Ranson delivers a relatable experience – presenting audiences with an indelible memory of a close friend’s passing. *Warren* is more than a mere entertaining spectacle. Prior to their normalization in AIDS media, *Warren* poses a litany of devastating existential questions: how could such a young, harmless, exuberant soul succumb to AIDS? How do individuals cope with the unexpected loss of friends and family? Can anyone derive some semblance of “beauty and meaning from these ashes?”

While Ranson excelled in her initial attempt, depicting AIDS in the southern theatre industry was and is a monumental task – undoubtedly complex and nearly impossible to execute properly given the numerous dimensions of the syndrome: one biological; another social, and of course, a looming political element inherent in public perception. How can anyone communicate the gravity of being diagnosed with a lethal illness? Furthermore, why should any straight person

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9Rebecca Ranson, *Warren*, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta Georgia, 48. All subsequent references and quotes refer to this particular typewritten script and therefore page numbers are approximate.
care about a “gay man’s cancer?”

Scholars, artists, and playwrights consider these questions critical to the representation of AIDS victims in popular culture. Their opinions generally coincide with a disdain for media censorship of the virus as well as a societal repression of the gay community living in fear of the virus; however, they tend to disagree on the function of representing AIDS and to the extent to which individuals without the virus may portray AIDS victims and propagate certain AIDS narratives. Still, the initial underlying motivations for southern AIDS activism in the theatre industry are nearly ubiquitous: remembering and memorializing victims that succumbed to the virus while simultaneously raising national awareness to induce policy solutions. However, the ways in which people recognize the impact of the AIDS epidemic vary dramatically. Thus, Warren is at the beginning of the emotional arc from grief to rage as the 1980s wore on with seemingly no end to the crisis.

In his article, *Levity and Gravity*, Chris Bartlett imagines a romanticized future free from the “specter of AIDS.” Bartlett claims that his rosy recollection of the past allows tenacious younger generations to confront the perils of the virus directly. Indeed, Bartlett contends that he “has seen the unspoken hostility toward the memory of those who have died and toward those who are currently living with HIV” and warns of the resulting fallout. Consequently, artists, directors, and storytellers should assume roles that remind the public of the light-hearted

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10 Lawrence K. Altman, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," *The New York Times* (New York), July 31, 1981. This article from *The New York Times* marks the first published piece detailing the disease as a rare “gay man’s cancer”. With little knowledge of AIDS, the disease initially remained nameless aside from descriptions of its lethality and association with the gay community.


humanity of PWAs. This lively portrayal, Bartlett argues, will inspire public mobilization and political action.\(^\text{15}\)

Conversely, Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman believe the opposite – society should remember victims of the AIDS Crisis and their enduring struggle for fundamental human rights with a sense of grounded realism. In *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, Hubbard and Schulman illustrate the evolution of AIDS activism in which HIV-infected individuals became subjects of an unending series of civil activist movements with little to no public response or remedy. As the 1980s drew to a close, Hubbard and Schulman note the rising death toll that accentuates a glaring lack of medical and legislative progress. They and the activists shown in their documentary contend that AIDS treatments existed, yet the Food and Drug Administration refused to test or distribute them promptly, blaming bureaucratic procedural obstacles.\(^\text{16}\) Without sufficient national attention complementing an appropriate, coordinated government response, AIDS activists elected to represent the AIDS Crisis with the sobering severity it rightfully deserves.

Similarly, David France posits issues with romanticizing the AIDS crisis in *How to Survive a Plague*. According to France, the AIDS Crisis was not static – instead, it continuously evolves to this day. Romanticizing the past trivializes the current struggle by reassuring current PWAs whose fight against the disease has historically been more lighthearted than their predecessors.\(^\text{17}\) France interviews survivors of the crisis, most of whom consider themselves fortunate outliers in the movement. Activists such as Peter Staley and Larry Kramer remind younger generations of AIDS victims that there is a troubling sense of desolation in AIDS

\(^{15}\) Bartlett, "Levity and Gravity," 32.
\(^{17}\) *How to Survive a Plague*, dir. David France (New York: Public Square Films, 2012).
activism; family and friends die rapidly; AIDS treatment is often elusive and inaccessible.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, remembering the 1980s as anything less than a desperate struggle for survival pays a severe injustice to the enumerable lives lost to the virus.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, in this tumultuous period plagued by constant sickness and death, there seems no room for glamorization.

Authors Alexandra Juhasz and Catherine Gund describe an additional constraint to portraying AIDS. Regardless of the ways in which the public perceives AIDS, the issue of censorship remains, especially in the South. In their book, \textit{AIDS TV}, Juhasz and Gund claim that “no medium reaches Americans (literate or not, English-speaking or not) than television…television is the most pervasive and persuasive form of much-needed AIDS education” – hence especially popular AIDS productions such as \textit{The Normal Heart} (1985) and \textit{Angels in America} (1991) eventually receiving modern television and film adaptations decades after their original productions.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, Juhasz and Gund note that AIDS media – film, television, and theatrical performances – remain perennially suppressed, particularly those focused on the AIDS Crisis’ disproportionate effect on minorities.\textsuperscript{21} Meredith Raimondo provides insight as to why institutions censor AIDS-related content. News stations may broadcast a specific set of news stories deficient in national AIDS-related headlines while political officials disregard any local pride marches and protests in an attempt to contain activist sentiments from protruding through a southern ideological barrier.\textsuperscript{22}

Messages that effectively overcome state-wide political impediments remain subject to scholarly debate, primarily in their function. In his article, \textit{Dramatic Plays as a Tool to Educate Young African American Females About HIV/AIDS}, Jonathan Livingston argues that there is a

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\textsuperscript{18} France, \textit{How to Survive a Plague}.
\textsuperscript{19} France, \textit{How to Survive a Plague}.
\textsuperscript{21} Juhasz and Gund, \textit{AIDS TV}, 7-10.
\textsuperscript{22} Raimondo, “Dateline Atlanta,” 347.
\end{flushleft}
lucid societal benefit to displaying AIDS-related media. Livingston claims that theater functions as an educational tool in HIV prevention and AIDS treatment. Collaborating with a team of researchers and playwrights, Livingston aired an original play, *Lonely Words* (2007), to a group of students at a few Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs). His findings indicate a sharp decrease in HIV-infection rates among HBCU students exposed to the play, revealing the potential for plays and entertainment as an effective measure of HIV-prevention, AIDS awareness, and treatment.

Jennifer Lauby expands this notion by applying the same methods to adolescent males in detention centers. In her article, *Preventing AIDS Through Live Movement and Sound: Efficacy of a Theater-Based HIV Prevention Intervention Delivered to High-Risk Male Adolescents in Juvenile Justice Settings*, Lauby claims that males ranging from 12-18 years old cycling through various juvenile detention centers encounter substantial risk of HIV-infection. By airing various plays such as *Lonely Words* and *A Question of Mercy* (1996) at local Philadelphia detention centers, Lauby observed a significant decrease in HIV-infection rates and a nontrivial decrease in recidivism rates among the demographic. Thus, AIDS-based entertainment may provide noticeable societal benefits in the realm of criminal justice as an ancillary outcome to prevention and general awareness.

Moreover, AIDS-based entertainment consoles grieving hearts. In Wesley Chenault’s collection of biographical stories and images, *Gay and Lesbian Atlanta*, he describes several instances of nonprofit organizations such as the Atlanta Gay Center providing open access to

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plays and entertainment shows aimed at comforting the friends and families of AIDS victims. In one such case, Chenault recounts the Atlanta Venture Sports Organization (AVSO) hiring a gay all-male clogging group, The Buffalo Chips, to perform at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. The AVSO marketed the show as a momentary respite from grieving; The Buffalo Chips even donated all proceeds from the show to support the educational needs of Atlanta's gay and lesbian communities.26

Despite the considerable benefits inherent in crafting AIDS-based entertainment, Sarah Schulman discusses the perils of constructing accounts that distort the reality of the AIDS Crisis. Her book, The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination, contends that hegemonic authorities have abridged the current AIDS narrative to craft a publicly palatable alteration. In this version, the primary victims of AIDS were white, middle-class gay men. Schulman retorts that this narrative is inconsistent with reality in which most AIDS victims were lower-class minorities with restricted access to sexual education and healthcare. Their societal status and subsequent marginalization rendered them forgettable and suitable for a narrative of an epidemic eradicated and suppressed in the eyes of the public. This marginalization translates to contemporary neglect and a general disregard for the ongoing AIDS epidemic.27 According to Schulman, “pretending that AIDS is not happening, so that we don't have to be accountable, destroys our integrity and therefore our future…for in the end, all this self-deception and replacing, this prioritizing and marginalizing, this smoothing over and pushing out, all of this profoundly affects how we think. That then creates what we think we feel.”28 If well-intended directors and playwrights construct an exclusive and inaccurate narrative through a genuine attempt at raising awareness for AIDS, the result may leave myriad individuals lost in the fray.

26 Wesley Chenault and Stacy Braukman, Gay and Lesbian Atlanta (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2008), 34-56.
28 Schulman, Gentrification, 52.
The versatility of AIDS-based media to benefit society cannot be misrepresented, nor can it be oversimplified. The intimate nature of death and loss present in AIDS narratives complicates the issue. Fittingly, depictions of the epidemic are similarly challenging to construct favorably. The debate, therefore, does not concern whether the southern entertainment industry should utilize the versatility of AIDS narratives to benefit society, but rather how it should compose those narratives, especially given the perplexing nature of the American South.

Incorporating sources from Ranson’s preserved historical collection and personal ephemera from her friendship with Warren Johnston, the first chapter of this project aims to elucidate Warren’s importance as one of the first AIDS plays, certainly the first distinctly southern AIDS play. The second chapter describes the evolution of AIDS plays from mournful first generation works to experimental, provocative, and oftentimes humorous second generation performances; moreover, it situates Ranson into this paradigm through an analysis of her abstract play, *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS* (1988). A concluding epilogue tasks readers with critically evaluating the evolution of southern AIDS theatre in accordance with modern conceptions of cultural appropriation, societal marginalization, and the burdens of inadequate historical preservation.

This project seeks to illuminate perspectives typically omitted from discussions of AIDS theatre. Although it may not examine every piece of southern AIDS media, perhaps a meticulous examination of Ranson’s personal experience with the Atlanta AIDS Crisis may inspire similar sentiments and integrate a few lost works into a frequently forgotten genre.
Although AIDS is a devastating and frightening disease, I believe that we as humans must reach out and make ourselves felt in this mysterious struggle. If I write a play about it or make a check to the AIDS research efforts or call or visit someone who is losing their life to it, I feel I am helping to fight the battle. This is my gift to Warren.

- Rebecca Ranson, *Warren* 29

The morning of August 30th, 1984 seemed typical for Atlanta’s Seven Stages Theatre – another Thursday morning meant another anxious last-minute rehearsal before staging yet another locally-funded play. Theatre executives, directors, and crew members met with the cast to discuss prop locations and lighting options. Local actor Jon Goldman recounts flipping through his script numerous times hoping that his method of hastily reciting consecutive pages of monologues and tense character dialogue would miraculously imbue him with the spirit of a physically deteriorating artist; it seemed like an ordinary day. 30 However, that evening proved far more momentous than anyone on set could have imagined.

During that timeframe, Seven Stages Theatre debuted *Warren* (1984), an original performance written and directed by veteran playwright Rebecca Ranson. *Warren* details the titular character’s struggle with a sudden AIDS diagnosis in January of 1984 and the ensuing emotional and physical fallout, eventually culminating in his unexpected passing on April 13th, 1984. 31 Individuals familiar with Ranson’s work may have dismissed any significant aberrations

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29 Rebecca Ranson, “Playwright’s Note.” *Warren: A Play by Rebecca Ranson*, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta Georgia. Ranson’s quote comes from an extended playwright’s note featured in Seven Stages Theatre’s production brochure printed during *Warren’s* initial debut. Future productions that elect to display a playwright’s note often implement an abridged version of the original retaining only the key facts about Warren Johnston’s life, diagnosis, and passing as well as Ranson’s personal motivations for writing the play.

30 "Ranson's Play Warren Returns," *The Southerner*, Summer 1997, accessed November 21, 2018. This article appears to have been removed from a newspaper and pasted to a sign promoting *Warren’s* theatrical reproduction. The entry neighbors several from an earlier issue of *The Southerner*, but it remains unclear if this is from the same newspaper. The article similarly lacks any indication of an author or a publication date; however, the article’s mention of July and August performance dates, cross-referenced with other publications claiming that the Atlanta Performance Gallery restaged Warren in 1997, implies that the newspaper likely dates sometime within the summer of 1997.

31 Rebecca Ranson, *Warren*, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta Georgia, 1.
from her previous plays which expressed personal struggles and societal ills surrounding the southern gay and lesbian community, save that Warren focused explicitly on a charismatic gay man grappling with an unanticipated AIDS diagnosis. Yet this antagonistic disease proved more than a mere mechanism for theatrical heartache or social commentary; it provided a vehicle for Ranson to convey an intimate, southern perspective of the emerging AIDS epidemic.

In this way, Warren established itself as the first truly southern AIDS play through its charming cast of characters and simple yet emotionally impactful plot which would become the standard for AIDS media within the region. Moreover, the circumstances in which Warren was conceived – Rebecca Ranson’s correspondences with Warren Johnston chronicling years of professional cooperation that fostered keen personal companionship, their implementation of artistic collaborations and theatre workshops, her final visit to his hospital room in San Francisco, and her grassroots fundraising efforts resulting in the play’s composition, production, and multitude of reproductions – resonated with audiences as an authentic representation of the seemingly ubiquitous struggles of immediate death, loss, grief, and hopelessness prevalent since the inception of the AIDS Crisis.

This chapter argues that Warren became a staple in southern AIDS media as a point of reference, emulation, and grateful dedication as evidenced through the myriad positive responses and personal letters addressed to Ranson following the play’s debut and subsequent interpretations. Beginning with a summary of Warren followed by an analysis of southern tropes and AIDS themes contained therein, this chapter concludes with an examination of Warren’s numerous reproductions, archived audience responses, and limited national recognition to assess its impact and situate Ranson’s work in the overarching compendium of southern AIDS theatre.

All subsequent references and quotes refer to this particular typewritten script and therefore page numbers are approximate.
Rebecca Ranson and Warren Johnston

The daughter of an acclaimed track and field coach in Chapel Hill, Rebecca Ranson was a southerner by birth. The North Carolina native attended the University of Georgia and received a Bachelor of Arts in Radio, Television, and Film in 1970. After conducting some field work and drafting her first theatrical production, Ranson graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Playwrighting from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Although she frequently relocated to several theatres around the east coast, Ranson ultimately settled at Seven Stages Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. Her family recalled that “she was a Tarheel, always and forever.”

As a playwright, gay rights activist, director, writer, and artist, Ranson crafted a life of service and humble dedication. Her work centered on multiple social justice initiatives including providing acting and writing courses to prison inmates, caring for people living with AIDS when the condition began ravaging local communities, and supporting community-based arts, media, and theatre projects. Early in her professional career, she established a lively theatre community in Durham dubbed Pocket Theater which remained active throughout the early 1970s. In 1976,

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she helped found Alternative ROOTS, a grassroots, local arts and theatre project in New Market, Tennessee. In the following decade, she began an arts collective in Atlanta that officially became the Southeast Arts, Media, and Education (SAME) organization in 1984. She went on to serve as the Vice President and one of the permanent directors of the program. Among their repertoire of artistic productions and educational projects, SAME provided an outlet to gay and lesbian activists and playwrights attempting to raise awareness about pressing social issues through plays.33

Part of Ranson’s personal commitment as an activist was to let ordinary people speak. Ranson was not an oral historian, but one of the things that makes Ranson’s work especially engaging is the way she employs the voices of real people. She was instrumental in documenting some of the earliest known cases of AIDS patients housed at the San Francisco General Hospital’s Ward 5B, the institution’s first location solely dedicated to serving people living with AIDS. Yet, she originally intended her travel to San Francisco in March of 1984 as a possible final visit and way of connecting with a dear friend suffering from AIDS: Warren Johnston.

Ranson met Warren in prison when they produced theatre workshops for incarcerated individuals together beginning in 1976. Warren was directing a show for inmates when Ranson joined as a script assistant. The pair instantaneously established a unique friendship in which his sheer chaos complimented, and often bested, her persistent need for order.34 Yet their undeniable chemistry naturally led them to become inseparable. Together, they wrote books, shot videos, and drafted theatrical productions until Warren opted to move to San Francisco in pursuit of an art career in the early 1980s.35 The two remained in close correspondence until January 1984 when doctors at the San Francisco General Hospital diagnosed Warren with AIDS.36 Ranson

33 The Ranson Family, "Rebecca Hargett Ranson, 1943-2017.
34 Ranson, “Playwright’s Note.”
35 Ibid.
vowed to visit Warren, at the very least to console her closest companion with whom she had fostered an irrevocably sincere bond.

Though having a fundamental knowledge of AIDS and its consequences, when she stepped onto the AIDS ward, Ranson became viscerally aware of a previously inchoate aspect of the illness. It certainly was not curable, much less survivable. According to Ranson:

Warren and all the other men that I met out there were in the dying process. And the feeling about AIDS at that point was that was all there was. You get it, you're going to live a few months, you're going to go through a progression of horrible diseases one right on top of the other, which is what Warren and most of the men that I interviewed out there did.37

Until that moment, Ranson assumed that “people must be paying attention and they must be trying to do everything they can do because people are dying;” consequently, the startling revelation of these men’s muted and disregarded passing instilled a justifiable sense of resentment toward politicians and local scientists.38 Rather than engaging these civic leaders, Ranson decided to circulate the stories of the afflicted as a means of consolation and reverent remembrance: “I became so much more interested in the men themselves and their personal histories that I got less intrigued with trying to make that kind of a statement and more interested in letting people learn to love them and learn to get involved some way around AIDS through that.”39

38 Ibid, 116-117.
39 Ibid, 116-117.
Thus, Ranson began composing the first southern AIDS play, both as a gift that preserved Warren Johnston’s legacy and as a way to grieve her dying friend. Her feat is especially astounding considering that she successfully staged one of the earliest, and arguably the most influential, AIDS plays as a southern lesbian in a theatre industry dominated by northern, homonormative men.\textsuperscript{40} Recalling their rich history as working professionals, fellow artists, and earnest partners, Ranson detailed Warren as she remembered him – warmhearted, carefree, and doubtlessly southern.

\textbf{Warren: A Synopsis}

\textit{Warren} details the struggles of a jubilant young man suffering through an unforeseen AIDS diagnosis. Audiences’ first exposure to the character of Warren Johnston is wholly unique. The play opens to Warren brining the room into his activist world with a rousing chorus of a recognizable social justice hymn: “The union is behind me, I shall not be moved,” he sings moments before directing his attention to the crowd.\textsuperscript{41} Warren unleashes an unabated stream of consciousness detailing his love for music, Poland, film, mime, dance, drawing, theatre, cooking, and the day-to-day depression of nightly news. Should any doubt remain regarding Warren’s gripping and charismatic innocence, it is quickly dispelled as Warren saturates his opening monologue with mirth and levity by performing a preview of his “vegetable soap opera” featuring a sentient red cabbage expressing its amaranthine love for a cucumber.\textsuperscript{42} After likening this fictional romance to that of his dear friend, Rebecca (an overt reference to Ranson’s past loves), he recalls one of his most vulnerable moments – being beaten and arrested at an anti-war

\textsuperscript{40} Alexander, "Clearing Space," 116.
\textsuperscript{41} Ranson, \textit{Warren}, 3.
\textsuperscript{42} Ranson, \textit{Warren}, 3.
demonstration moments before inciting a jail-wide protest chant.\textsuperscript{43} Actor Jon Goldman employs an ephemeral pause before inviting the audience to reminisce in his profound experience. “We were just this throb of music…,” he rejoices, thereby concluding an extensive, engaging, and personal explanation of Warren Johnson.\textsuperscript{44} Audiences certainly sympathized with Warren despite only knowing his past struggles and aspirations for a mere five minutes.

A brief moment passes as stage lights illuminate Rebecca standing across the stage. Her already tired heart expresses intimate sentiments, asserting that she loved Warren dearly and regrets the lapsed time between her infrequent visits. The most recent trip occurred before his AIDS diagnosis while Warren was visiting his mother, Florence, who had called her son home to tend to her worsening emphysema. Florence recalls the moments preceding her son’s return in which her strife for a clean breath of air rivaled only her desire to see Warren before her imminent passing. Thankfully, Warren was “a good boy; he came home.”\textsuperscript{45}

The play progresses as a reflection of these introductory monologues depicting Warren as his mother’s sole caretaker. Florence briefly chastises Warren’s fashion choice pleading him to resist wearing his denim jacket to her funeral. Warren presents his wrinkled suit in response, shifting the conversation until Rebecca arrives. A compassionate tone and warmhearted embrace accompany Florence’s ardor to show Rebecca childhood photographs of Warren. With an emboldened sense of sincerity, Florence abruptly asks if Rebecca loves her son. “Yes. I always have” Rebecca replies, somberly reminding Florence that Warren spent the previous night discussing his mother’s debilitating illness.\textsuperscript{46} The two ultimately conclude that Warren should move back home.

\textsuperscript{43} Ranson, \textit{Warren}, 3.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 6.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 8.
Warren surreptitiously savors his idyllic San Francisco residence. In a conversation with his friend and former lover, Kelly, Warren conveys a buoyant sense of belonging through his Pacific Coast lifestyle; his avid appreciation for the history of gay struggle manifests through a desire to volunteer at the Harvey Milk Archives. Amid his excitement, Warren pleads for Kelly to live with him in his haleysom Californian paradise to which Kelly dejectedly responds, “maybe at the end of this tour. Maybe next summer. Maybe sooner.” Kelly’s character does not know that Warren will not last the summer. This line would have certainly hit home in a theatre filled with men and women grieving the abrupt departure of their friends, many of whom now knew that there may not be a “next summer.” Ranson ingeniously juxtaposes Kelly’s delay with a flashback to Warren returning home after a wedding of his friends, Sam and Joe. Sam claims that “Warren was filled up with excitement.” Indeed, Warren’s euphoric response demonstrates his innate whimsy along with his animated adoration for his friends and the enchanted institution of matrimony:

Rebecca,  
I just got back from a wedding.  
Sam and Joe got married!  
They got married in the garden.  
Married!  
They got married!  

Warren’s elation is short lived as the play resumes with a present-day conversation between Warren, Rebecca, Florence, Warren’s father, Wiley, and Wiley’s current wife, Helen. Helen asks if Warren has met any “homosexuals” in San Francisco, recalling thousands of gay men and women marching in a televised parade for gay pride day. Wiley dismisses the notion of “gay pride” entirely while Helen curiously ponders the concept believing that she has never


Ibid, 11.

Ibid, 11.

Ibid, 11.

Ibid, 11.
met a gay man before. In a comedic hint of dramatic irony, Warren responds, “you probably have,” yet his stepmother continues. “I don’t think I have,” Helen confidently claims, “course I guess you can’t tell just by looking at somebody.” Wiley disagrees, “I think I could.” Donning a satirical countenance and tinged with a sardonic tone, Warren scoffs, “I doubt it, Daddy.”

Warren breaks the 4th wall and confides to the audience a sudden realization that he should come out to his parents before returning to San Francisco else his mother might succumb to her illness without knowing the truth about her only son’s sexuality. Warren subsequently confronts his parents, revealing his ongoing relationship with his boyfriend, Joff. Struck with disbelief, Florence bluntly asks Warren if he truly is gay while Wiley remains steadfast and silent until Warren expressly requests his father’s opinion on the matter. “I don’t understand it,” Wiley answers. Amidst the tension, Warren mentions that he is “sorry about grandchildren,” prompting Wiley’s bewildered contempt, “so am I.” Although Wiley disapproves of his son’s sexuality to the point of absolute dismay culminating in an utter rejection thereof, he reminds Warren that regardless of sexual preference, Wiley still loves him. Helen claims that she suspected Warren might be gay and promises unconditional compassion and understanding, an offer she extends on Wiley’s behalf.

Rather than leaving Warren uneasy, his terse coming-out experience enlivens him to discuss his love life with Rebecca. Warren details his relationship with Joff exposing a disturbing past; nevertheless, Warren expresses his poignant memories with a sense of glee and joviality typically prevalent in nascent relationships. His earliest recollection of Joff concerns his lover’s abject depression encasing unbridled self-doubt forcing Joff to deem himself a bad person.

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51 Ranson, Warren, 11.
52 Ibid, 12.
53 Ibid, 12.
54 Ibid, 13.
56 Ibid, 13.
Moreover, Joff assigns his lover a personalized wardrobe citing a disdain for Warren’s fashion sense. A concerned Rebecca asks, “is [Joff] good to you?” Warren replies defensively claiming that “he’s as good as he knows how to be…he’s not used to being very good to his lovers.” Likewise, Warren overlooks a blatant drinking problem coupled with drug abuse to appreciate Joff’s intellect, beautiful body, and social work.

Rebecca immediately shifts the subject to Kelly, initiating an expository flashback revealing a clandestine sexual encounter between Warren and his friend. According to Kelly, “[we] were these two straight men staying in a house together; [we] weren’t. [We] were these two gay men thinking the other man was straight.” Warren and Kelly’s resultant covert relationship fizzled eventually rousing mutual feelings of regret. In the following scene, Sam compounds Warren and Kelly’s melancholic mood by expounding on a dispiriting aspect of his seemingly glamorized wedding: Joe has AIDS.

Indeed, the play first mentions the crippling disease during Sam and Kelly’s successive heartrending introspections. Kelly, apprehensive about his future with Warren, forfeits the prospect of genuine love while Sam recognizes the perils of postponing an engagement to his ailing boyfriend. “I figured I wouldn’t get a second chance to marry Joe because he was so sick,” Sam recounts, “I was right. We got married in December. He got an AIDS diagnosis in January.” Sam continues informing the audience of his personal experience with AIDS, severely subverting his preconceived expectations for the disease:

Joe didn’t have any lesions.
He just had sort of general maladies,
a sore throat and a dry cough.
He lost weight.
Then he got a yeast infection and a diagnosis.

57 Ranson, Warren, 15.
58 Ibid, 15.
59 Ibid, 15.
60 Ibid, 15.
61 Ibid, 16.
A brief moment of levity disrupts Sam’s somber monologue – a present-day Warren absentmindedly sings “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” by Tammy Wynette, espousing a select affinity for country songs that “spell stuff out.” Warren suspends his carol and subsequent cheeky conversation with Rebecca to tend to his mother. Florence pleads for Warren to stay, stressing an inability to walk around the house without exhausting herself. Warren remains overtly ambivalent on the matter until Florence falls asleep, at which point, he confides in Rebecca his acute, deep-seated anxieties about Florence’s illness. “I don’t want Mama to die. I don’t want Mama to die alone,” Warren nervously repeats as he seriously considers moving home to Tennessee permanently. As their conversation devolves into an existential examination, Warren admits that he does not fear death, although the prospect of suffering from some “terrible disease” incites a sense of severe restlessness. He also ponders the aching feeling of “[knowing] you weren’t going to live much longer.”

Ultimately, Warren elects to lead a content life in San Francisco rather than return home, dissolve his relationship with Joff, and stymie upcoming plans to explore the West Coast with Rebecca. Warren offers to relay Rebecca’s plays to local theatres in California, reminding her that he purchased a tuxedo for when they achieve fame and fortune. After the pair romanticize their ideal future lives, Warren leaves Rebecca a nebulous parting comment regarding his physical health. The young artist seems to suffer from an unknown bowel disease. Dismissing the symptoms as a result of reckless barhopping, Warren and Rebecca part ways as the setting shifts to San Francisco.

Sam immediately greets Warren with seemingly banal details that, in the context of AIDS, are in fact a pleasant revelation: Joe ate a whole bowl of soup, sat in the garden for an

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62 Ranson, Warren, 17.
63 Ibid, 18.
hour, and talked about flowers, lightbulbs, and subjects beyond AIDS and his worsening condition. Following an evanescent sense of heartache, Warren updates Sam on his coming-out experience; Sam reassures Warren that he, Kelly, Joe, and the entire gay community support him, comprising a family that understands and categorically accepts him. Indeed, according to Sam, “we talk. We give each other real hugs. We struggle but we love.” Sam undoubtedly yearns for a nostalgic, carefree past absent of omnipresent panics as to whom contracted the disease. A curt uncertainty, Sam asks if Warren is sick. “I don’t think I am, but I don’t know either,” he replies, wholly divorced of confidence.

Meanwhile, Helen, Florence, Wiley, and Rebecca report Warren calling about his progressing illness. Helen claims he feels unwell; Florence notes that he called three times in a week, moving from one hospital bed to the next; Wiley reasons that he must be taking poor care of himself, and resolves to send money for better food and to ease the exorbitant hospital bills; Rebecca, however, worries that his nightly fevers signal a disparaging truth: Warren has AIDS.

Despite Warren not initially having the “correct” symptoms for an AIDS diagnosis, Rebecca’s fear lingers in the audience’s mind as the play continues with Warren and Kelly arguing about a pending appointment at the local clinic. Warren’s doctor suggests he remain in

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64 Ranson, Warren, 22.
65 Ibid, 22.
66 Before identifying HIV as the cause and subsequently developing tests for the virus, AIDS was diagnosed when a patient presented with certain opportunistic infections that indicated a damaged immune system. Because the model was based on gay men, many women were denied care because their opportunistic infections were not “on the list.”
the hospital to undergo a barrage of medical evaluations spanning multiple days in the San Francisco General Hospital’s Ward 5B. “That’s the AIDS ward,” Warren replies as the doctor halfheartedly reassures him that the forthcoming prognosis is incomplete. He may still test negative for the virus. Sam and Kelly comfort Warren, adorning him in hospital robes while transporting him to the AIDS ward. The doctor returns bearing positive test results indicating several opportunistic infections including pneumocystis and meningitis as a result of an improperly functioning immune system: Warren has AIDS.

Kelly, the first person Warren entrusts with intimate knowledge of his diagnosis, refuses to depart San Francisco until Warren recovers. Irked by Kelly’s obstinacy, Warren demands his friend retire to Tennessee rather than watch his deteriorating conditions precipitate an inevitable death. The dying artist instructs Kelly, “you need to get on with your life,” citing a guilty conscious should the disease indirectly impede Kelly’s livelihood. Adamant in his refusal to leave, Kelly asks if Warren fears his diagnosis. Disoriented and justifiably enervated, Warren expeditiously lists several tasks to complete before his passing ranging from informing relatives of his limited time left to donating his belongings. Kelly suggests Warren seek solace by living at home with Sam and Joe. Warren abruptly responds, “I want to go back to the South to die.” Troubled by his dwindling days, Warren regrets his lack of accomplishments relative to his litany of aspirations. Warren claims, “I don’t have a legacy…I don’t want to die, Kelly,” abandoning his signature frivolity for a stark recognition of his physical maladies.

Warren decides to notify his family and close friends regarding the diagnosis. Following a brief conversation with Florence, Wiley, and Rebecca, the once-vivacious artist wishes solely

67 Ranson, Warren, 24.
70 Ibid, 28.
to cry for a while. Kelly subsequently reflects on Warren’s situation in light of other AIDS victims:

   It’s like a war zone.
   Men hold each other and cry.
   We talk from our hearts in a way we never could before.
   Sam and I cry every time we see each other.
   I can’t look at what this is doing to him without crying.
   …
   It’s like people do everything they can think of to do,
   But nothing stops the dying.\footnote{Ranson, \textit{Warren}, 31.}

Sam and Joe offer Kelly a place to stay during the remainder of his visit to San Francisco; Kelly agrees, thanking Sam and offering help in any conceivable way.

   Meanwhile, Warren meets his attending nurse, Charles, a charming, rambunctious gay man who serves patients confined to the AIDS ward. The voluble nurse offers Warren champagne and a chance to deliberate his condition candidly. Initially reticent, Warren eventually admits to feeling “rotten, scared, mad as hell, like [he’s] getting cheated out of [his] life.”\footnote{Ibid, 33.} Charles consoles Warren, assuring him that his feelings are natural. Moreover, Charles provides a personal assortment of bedtime stories; according to him, “they put everyone to sleep.”\footnote{Ibid, 33.} This character – one might even say trope - of the sassy gay nurse makes an appearance in many subsequent AIDS plays and most famously in Kushner’s \textit{Angels in America} (1991) as the character Belize.\footnote{Tony Kushner, \textit{Angels in America}, (Theatre Communications Group: New York, 1992).}

   Warren asks Charles if every patient that lived in his room died of AIDS – most did, but some survived. Warren becomes convinced that he will promptly join the ranks of souls destined to pass in the AIDS ward but finds mental relief in staring at the scenic mountain ranges outside his window. The terrain reminds him of a familiar sight, his cherished memories of Tennessee’s
picturesque southern landscape. Charles asks to see Warren’s illustrations and comments that he may soon resort to drawing while restricted to his hospital room. For Warren, the prospect of spending his remaining days interpreting the world through art is nothing short of sublime. Charles, meanwhile, digresses into a seemingly interminable rant about his lover, putting Warren to sleep immediately.

Warren’s family flies to San Francisco the following day to visit their ailing son. However, Warren seems excessively concerned with how enjoyable their San Francisco stay will prove, requesting that Sam spend time with his parents instead of relying solely on regular dismal medical visits. Kelly rearranges the hospital room at Warren’s request, compliments his appearance, and agrees to care for his family during their trip. Upon their arrival, the family discusses mundane details about travel and readily available snacks until Florence notices that her son has lost substantial weight.

The following scene is equally humbling and pedagogical. Warren explains that weight loss and diarrhea are common byproducts of AIDS. Florence illustrates a callow understanding of the emerging affliction when she asks if doctors and nurses in the AIDS ward fear that they may contract the disease themselves. Warren informs his mother that AIDS is a budding disease without a significant volume of supporting research. Wiley recalls that the hospitals in Tennessee refused to treat Warren due to limited knowledge concerning the effects of AIDS exposure; Warren retorts, “or they didn’t want me there. A lot of people with AIDS are treated like lepers…by doctors, too.”\(^75\) Likewise, Helen initiates a conversation with Sam in the hallway regarding Warren’s condition and AIDS in general. When asked about Warren’s physical state, Sam responds, “he’s real sick. He goes up and down. That’s usual. As soon as he gets well from one thing, something else gets him. It’s a vicious losing battle.”\(^76\) Helen seems startled by the

\(^{75}\) Ranson, *Warren*, 38.

\(^{76}\) Ibid, 39.
number of AIDS patients in the hospital, yet Sam clarifies that there is a litany of hospitals housing myriad men compounded by an increasing sect living at home with additional diagnoses arising daily. Helen wonders if Sam foresees the development of a cure – although San Francisco appropriates research funding and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) deems AIDS research critical to national safety, Sam doubts the likelihood of a coming remedy for the primarily “gay men’s disease”, claiming that “there are a lot of people who don’t care what happens to us.” Appalled, Helen aims to convince people of the gravity inherent in the AIDS Crisis.

Sam and Helen return to the hospital room with Charles concurrently. Charles lavishes Warren with praise claiming that his irresistible pulchritude rivals only his artistic prowess. Warren’s parents step outside to speak with Warren’s doctor. In a fit of desperation, Florence asks whether her son will make it home to Tennessee. His father furthers the discussion, bluntly inquiring if Warren is dying. Unfortunately, the doctor is unsure as to how long Warren will survive – perhaps months, days, or minutes – with the only assurance being that he must remain under perennial medical examination given that there is no available treatment. In all likelihood, he reasons that Warren will soon succumb to the disease.

Considering the severity of Warren’s condition, Florence, Helen, and Wiley deliver their final goodbyes: Helen claims to love Warren as a son; Florence considers Warren’s frequent phone calls “all [she] had to look forward to;” Wiley confesses that he has always been unreservedly proud of his only son. Consequently, Warren begs his father to come closer to impart an impactful final message, “you were a good father. You held me when I was scared.” Once his parent’s leave, Warren meets with one last visitor: Rebecca.

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77 Ranson, Warren, 39.
78 Ibid, 41.
79 Ibid, 42.
80 Ibid, 42.
Employing the same lighthearted sass emblematic of their prior encounters, Rebecca and Warren share a distinct, ineradicable bond. Warren shows Rebecca letters from numerous friends and acquaintances – Ruby, Valeria, Roger, and especially Taylor, whose letters hold a special place in Warren’s heart, “I love his letters. He’s always depressed!”

Rebecca echoes Florence and Wiley’s concerns about Warren’s excessive weight loss while providing a compassionate, sincere comfort. She asks Warren about Joff, whom Warren compares to his father:

> When I used to be little and scared at night, I’d try to call Daddy but I’d be scared to say it loud enough. Finally, I would stop whispering and Daddy would hear me and come in and put his arms around me and take away my fear. That’s what I was to Joff. That’s what I wanted to be.\(^{82}\)

Despite this, Warren wishes to spend his final moments apart from Joff; rather, he prefers to spend his last days with Rebecca and Kelly. Rebecca cherishes a recent memory of Warren featured earlier in the production in which the young artist daydreams while singing Tammy Wynette, a memento of genuine companionship. Warren asks Rebecca to exfoliate his dry skin with lotion as a final caring embrace before she leaves.

Suddenly the entire cast addresses the audience directly, simultaneously proclaiming, “we wanted to keep Warren with us.”\(^{83}\) Rebecca mentions writing a play about him which she will stage once it receives his approval. The characters each individually address the audience. Kelly claims that Warren experiences frequent seizures in a critical state, signaling his approaching passing. Florence, Wiley, Rebecca, and Kelly sequentially speak Warren’s name one final time before Charles discovers his lifeless body:

> Kelly, Warren died this morning. He died looking out the window. He didn’t struggle. He just stopped.\(^{84}\)

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\(^{81}\) Ranson, *Warren*, 43.
\(^{82}\) Ibid, 44.
\(^{83}\) Ibid, 46.
\(^{84}\) Ibid, 47.
Kelly regrets letting his dear friend die alone. With the help of Wiley, Charles and Sam, he provides a ritual service for Warren but refuses to name it a funeral (perhaps since Florence and Rebecca flew home already). Florence believes that her son is still with her spiritually while Helen attests to Wiley’s growing loneliness. Rebecca reveals that she spent a month interviewing AIDS patients in San Francisco following Warren’s death. She stayed long enough to see Joe pass on and resolves to write a book concerning her deceased friends as well as other patients in the AIDS ward. Sam and Kelly conclude the play by rehearsing a troubling truth:

> It’s a war zone.
> Young vital men are dying.
> We’re close in a way we never were before.
> There has to be some beauty and meaning from these ashes.85

**Southern Elements in Warren**

Audiences searching for southern themes in *Warren* need look no further than the opening monologue in which Warren Johnston marches on stage merrily cheering “the Union is behind me, I shall not be moved,” alluding to the American spiritual, “We Shall Not Be Moved.”86 This particular folk song, often associated with the Civil Rights Movement, is emblematic of Warren’s appeals to southern culture, a recurring theme within the play. Members of the gay and lesbian community later adapted the song as a Gay Rights anthem with Pete Seeger adding the lines “we’re women and men together, we shall not be moved. Yes, straight and gay together, we shall not be moved.”87 Considering Ranson and Warren’s profound

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86 Earl Martin Pedersen *Hear America Sing: The 300 Greatest Folk Songs of the American People* (Napoli: Stampa Centro "Aquilone", 1990), 174. The title of this song changes based on its rendition varying between “I Shall Not Be Moved” and “We Shall Not Be Moved”. Both versions originated from the same source and shift based on the number of people singing it or simply arbitrarily.
87 Pete Seeger, writer, *The Essential Pete Seeger*, Columbia/Legacy, 2013, CD. In a few live performances in the 1990s, Seeger employed the modified version of “We Shall Not Be Moved”. Since *Warren* premiered years prior, it remains unclear as to whether the song gained enough popularity in Atlanta as a Gay Rights anthem to compel Ranson to include it for that specific purpose rather than as an opening gesture implying a southern cultural setting.
dedication to social justice activism, especially causes centered around incarcerated individuals and gay rights, the pair likely rehearsed the song multiple times, infusing it with a deeply personal significance. Yet the song’s inextricable connection to social movements throughout the South immediately identifies Warren’s setting as unequivocally southern; Atlanta audiences in 1984, in the shadow of the Civil Rights Movement, would have immediately connected to this tradition.

Warren Johnston’s character appears to be an overtly southern archetype. In her first lines of the play, Ranson’s character describes the young man from Nashville as a “wild country bumpkin” whom she would frequently “visit at his Mama’s.” Indeed, Warren is a charming and wholesome Tennessee native who takes care of his mother by cooking her Cajun bay scallops and shrimp marinated in wine and butter. His caricatural stereotype materializes through an inattentive rendition of Tammy Wynette’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E.” Ranson’s deliberate casting of Jon Goldman, who employs an authentic southern accent, ensures that Warren’s southern heritage is persuasive and satisfying. Perhaps the most apparent “southern” aspect of Warren’s character is his indelible bond with Tennessee. After being diagnosed with AIDS and subsequently exiled to a San Francisco Ward 5B, Warren claims that he “[wants] to go back to the South to die.” He wants to return home. Warren is never repatriated to his Tennessee home; instead, he remains in his hospital bed spending hours gazing out at the scenic San Francisco terrain. According to Warren, “I lay here and look at it for hours. It reminds me a little of Tennessee and the mountains.”

88 Ranson, Warren, 6.
Although Cajun food is generally associated with Louisiana culinary culture, its influence permeates state boundaries giving this unique cooking style a distinctly southern connotation.
90 Ranson, Warren, 17.
91 Ibid, 28.
92 Ibid, 34.
Beyond location, the presence of rich, traditional family ties represents another theme prevalent in southern works. Warren’s parents embody a stereotypical southern married couple. Their tightknit family dynamic, remarkable shows of hospitality, unwelcoming attitude toward deviations from heterosexual norms, and rejection of outsiders (San Francisco residents in Warren’s case) all constitute markedly southern characteristics.93 When her son visits Tennessee during the play’s inception, Warren’s mother, Florence, remarks that her emphysema made it so she “couldn’t hardly get a breath of air.”94 She had contacted her son pleading him to return home and tend to his sick mother before she succumbs to her ailment. Upon his arrival, Warren regales his mother with rosy recollections of San Francisco before she addresses Warren’s friend, Rebecca, questioning Warren’s fashion sense and claiming that “most of the men [she] knows don’t wear high heels.”95 The resulting dialogue involves Warren’s coming-out experience in

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95 Ibid, 9.
which he informs Florence of his sexuality. She promptly relays this information to her ex-
husband and Warren’s father, Wiley, and Warren’s stepmother, Helen in turn.

The conversation begins when Florence asserts that Warren enjoys residing in San
Francisco, causing Helen to become inquisitive. She immediately asks Warren if he knows any
homosexuals living in San Francisco. “I saw a parade on TV news and there were thousands and
thousands of homosexuals marching and more than that watching. It was for a gay pride day, I
think,” she hesitantly claims, turning to her husband for confirmation. Yet Warren’s father
becomes emotionally reclusive, stating that he “[doesn’t] see what they got to be so proud of.”
Following a contemplative monologue, Warren reveals his sexuality to his family. Abruptly and
absentmindedly, Florence shrieks, “my boy is gay,” instilling a tense tone among the room. A
brief silence encompasses the stage as Warren asks if his father has anything to say. “I don’t
understand it,” Wiley replies, “I’m not sure I can accept the fact that you’re gay, Warren.”
This rejection of his son’s sexuality grounded in heteronormative familial expectations cements Wiley
as an archetypal father to a southern gay man.

Moreover, in an accompanying expository poem Ranson crafted deliberately for Wiley,
he likens he and his son’s final embrace in the San Francisco hospital bed to a similar instance
from when Warren was a child searching for comfort in his father’s arms – a momentary respite
from his intense fear of the dark. Although this heartfelt moment initially seems to portray Wiley
as more than the typical southern father, he immediately concludes that he would rather have
sought out a woman’s breast than a father’s loving embrace, thereby fixating on Warren’s
sexuality and constraining his character to a generic and rather unsympathetic patriarch.

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97 Ibid, 11.
100 Rebecca Ranson, *Wiley*, August 30, 1984, A poem by Rebecca Ranson, Seven Stages Theatre, Atlanta.
At the play’s conclusion, Wiley solemnly sings the Lord’s Prayer in sobering remembrance, contrasting his unwillingness to accept Warren’s sexuality with genuine compassion for his deceased son. Wiley’s devout religious mourning accentuates his role as a typical – almost clichéd – Tennessee father and compounds Helen’s naïveté and Florence’s disbelief in epitomizing the recognizable, undoubtedly southern family dynamic.

**Warren: An AIDS Tragedy**

*Warren* excelled in experimenting and eventually pioneering a framework for implementing emotionally arresting themes and mechanics in an emerging medium: AIDS theatre. Chronicled as one of the earliest pieces of theatre centered around AIDS, and the first to depict a gay man succumbing to the disease, *Warren* set the stage for a poignant portrayal of ubiquitous sentiments that resonated with audiences throughout the South – anguish, desolation, and a general disconsolation coupled with unrequited pursuits of locating some semblance of “beauty and meaning from these ashes.” In this sense, Ranson’s play emphatically rejects the notion that the burden of AIDS is restrained to its victims; instead, *Warren* urges audiences to assume Ranson’s position as a mere bystander forced to watch a close friend perish undeservedly, thereby assuredly inciting passionate responses and attesting to the prevalence of reverberated sympathies among friends, family, and loved ones. She accomplishes this by allowing the viewer to foster an organic, intimate connection with Warren within the first five minutes of the production.

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101 Ranson, *Warren*, 47.
In his opening monologue, Warren effervescently recites a classic American folk song, indulges the audience with his longing to escape the hassles of daily life, and shares his aspirations of producing a comical “vegetable soap opera” starring a cucumber and a head of red cabbage. Ranson’s inclusion of this scene was a calculated response to early criticisms claiming that the play lacked sufficient details as to Warren’s fundamental identity prior to his AIDS diagnosis. Consequently, Ranson devised an ingenious expository monologue that effortlessly captivates audiences and perfectly encapsulates Ranson’s relationship with her fellow artist, writer, and dear friend. Pre-diagnosis Warren exudes innocence, familiarity, and most importantly, humanity.

These endearing traits adroitly juxtapose with the untold sympathies of Warren’s close friends, Sam and Kelly. In an expository poem detailing Sam’s motivations and apprehensions throughout the play, Ranson writes,

It’s a war zone out here. My lover got diagnosed two months after we moved in together…and now Warren is dying, too…I’m worried about myself, too. Every spot that appears on my skin, every spell of diarrhea, every pull of tightness from my chest; I want to know if I’m going to be next…it’s a war zone out, but you get used to it.

Sam’s sobering comments on the state of the AIDS Crisis as it relates to his personal life exude hopelessness – melancholic reminders that Warren poses a momentous sense of dread among each tear and brief burst of laughter. “Vital men are dying for no reason,” Sam claims, “just like they do in a war.” Similarly, Kelly breaks the narrative after Warren receives his AIDS diagnosis

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104 Ranson, Warren, 3.
105 Rebecca Ranson, Sam, August 30, 1984, A poem by Rebecca Ranson, Seven Stages Theatre, Atlanta.
to reiterate, “it’s like a war zone. Men hold each other and cry. We talk from our hearts in a way we never could before.”

These conflicting outlooks, from Warren’s waning optimism to Sam and Kelly’s resignation, create a crescendo of emotions reaching a climax in each character’s concluding monologue. His mother, distraught by her son’s passing, cries, “my boy is still with me. Even if I can’t talk to him on the phone, I talk to him anyhow – every single day.” Meanwhile, Warren’s father frequently spends his days fishing in isolated locations alone, which Helen claims makes him feel closer to Warren. Warren’s friend and ex-lover, Kelly somberly insists, “we’re close in a way we never were before.” These sentiments constitute a collective aim of exposing the collateral harm inherent in losing loved ones to AIDS: a nearly universal suffering. According to Ranson, “the play became a microcosm of the large circle of people that Warren touched with his art and his love. It also became a vehicle for raising consciousness of folks in general and a symbol for the many lives lost to AIDS.”

Indeed, Ranson expertly transcribes the irrepressible hopelessness inherent in observing loved ones suffer during the AIDS Crisis. For instance, the premise of the play revolves around Warren’s decision to return home per his dying mother’s request. Subverting the initial conflict, Warren’s mother outlives her son solely due to his AIDS diagnosis – a testament to the untimely, unwarranted passing of young gay men, a visceral fear plaguing Warren’s subconscious throughout the play. Specifically, he laments the notion of knowing his life will be cut short, mirroring his mother’s persistent discomfort and struggle with chronic emphysema. Despair pervades both circumstances as Warren’s mother deems his calls the only redeeming aspect of

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106 Ranson, Warren 48.
107 Ibid, 47.
108 Ibid, 47.
110 Rebecca Ransom, “Playwright’s Note.”
her otherwise dismal life while Warren abandons all exuberance by wishing his friends would disregard his worsening state and “get on with [their] lives.”

Similarly, Sam rejoices at his late spouse, Joe, spending moments in the garden, eating an entire bowl of soup, and completing the seemingly superficial task of discussing something other than AIDS. Kelly expounds on the heartache,

A drag queen came by last night and performed her entire repertoire. Joe smiled and smiled. And then the drag queen sat on the front steps, sobbing her heart out. It’s like people do everything they can think of to do, But nothing stops the dying.

An introspection of life’s innate fragility, Warren details the evolution of the “gay man’s cancer” into a pervasive misery that leaves no heart unscathed.

Reception and Post-Production

Warren became an artistic marvel rapidly disseminating throughout the southern gay and lesbian theatre community following its initial debut. Audiences laughed, sobbed, and ultimately mourned the titular character in an intimate fashion that exposed their innermost sympathies—heartache, grief, and the emotional repercussions of an untimely passing. In many ways, Ranson’s one-act masterpiece developed into more than a mere relic of Warren Johnston’s life; instead, it provided an accessible outlet for southern people living with AIDS. Warren was their play. It told their stories without mentioning their names. Consequently, Warren’s numerous reproductions and associated fundraising events for AIDS research reverberated a ubiquitous

111 Ranson, Warren, 26.
resonation pervading throughout the nation, moving the hearts of southern and northern
audiences alike – albeit to a lesser extent in the North due to a belated, limited exposure therein.
Positive responses, heartfelt letters, and a widespread, ardent insistence on circulating Ranson’s
performance demonstrate Warren’s profound influence, especially regarding its comfort in
expressing a distressing yet tangible topic often condemned to public silence.

In an open letter to the cast of Warren, a keepsake Ranson held closely dating back to
August 31, 1984, one day after Warren’s debut, an Atlanta social worker named Matt Nelson
described his immediate connection to the play as well as his reaction to the charming cast of
characters. Nelson writes: “four friends and I were present for your production last night, and
never have I been involved in a more powerful production…I have, from time to time, worked
with the terminally ill – although never with a person with AIDS. You people put forth your very
soul last night and I still shutter[sic] at the recollection.”114 Nelson continues by addressing each
member of the cast directly citing his response to each individual’s performance. To actor Jon
Goldman, he comments, “Jon – you tore at my every emotion. You were so alive and in love
with what was coming tomorrow – you couldn’t die…but you did.”115 Likewise, his concluding
remarks bestow a sincere impression of gratitude: “Thank you for an intensity of emotion that
comes only rarely. Warren can rest peacefully. Rebecca Ranson has given him his legacy.”116
Although Nelson’s letter predated any reproduction of Warren, it accurately assessed the
adorned praise the play would receive.

115 While each actor received praise, Nelson’s portion on Jon’s performance focuses on the emotional climax of the play. It is powerful, insightful, and grounded in a general sense of sympathy. See Nelson, “Open Letter.”
116 Nelson, "Open Letter."
Since Ranson initially staged *Warren* at Atlanta’s Seven Stages Theatre, the play’s exposure was limited, primarily attracting audiences dedicated to Seven Stages’ productions as well as local residents who were familiar with Ranson’s previous work. In the ensuing weeks, however, critics and theatre buffs embraced *Warren*’s unmatched passion and arresting characters, recommending the acclaimed play to directors and producers nationwide. By October 17th, the Celebration Theatre in Los Angeles staged a production of *Warren*; a theatre on campus at San Diego University followed suit shortly thereafter. As public familiarity surrounding *Warren* blossomed, artists, activists, and community organizers – each deeply moved by Ranson’s absorbing AIDS drama – adopted the play for subsequent reproductions.

From performance arts centers in Honolulu to those at the University of Arizona, productions of *Warren* quickly pervaded throughout myriad theatre communities across the country. Musician Dan Hill of Tuscon, Arizona wrote to Ranson regarding *Warren*’s production therein:

My name is Dan Hill…I’m a musician, song-writer and (very) amateur typist. I also have AIDS. I just finished reading your play about Warren. I cried my eyes out…the lines in the play are extremely real-to-life. I’ve said and felt a lot of these same feelings, especially that I only wanted the doctors around me in the hospital and friends to go about their lives.

Hill’s reaction to *Warren* proves an intriguing facet of the play’s reproduction: the lasting influence of personal affections fostered during the 90-minute spectacle. Individuals such as Hill relate to *Warren* through a coalescence of the gay and lesbian community in a mutual identification of the bleak and palpable reality contained within the play’s underlying subject matter. Yet *Warren*’s identity as an AIDS play expanded beyond an engrossing depiction of the widespread trauma associated with an AIDS diagnosis.

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117 Tom Vegh, Personal letter, Tom Vegh to Rebecca Ranson, October 17, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
118 Dan Hill, Personal letter, Dan Hill to Rebecca Ranson, March 1, 1986, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
In fact, the play functioned as an avenue for AIDS-education and a lucrative grassroots fundraising effort for AIDS-related research. After the play’s debut, Rebecca Ranson faced severe doubts regarding the feasibility of touring *Warren*; however, in her correspondence with the CDC, she noted the possibility of instituting grassroots fundraising efforts at numerous local activist events to afford reproductions.\(^{119}\) Considering Ranson’s performance a valuable vehicle to educating the public about the disease, the CDC supported her in her endeavors and sponsored *Warren’s* second production in Atlanta from December 11\(^{th}\) – 22\(^{nd}\), 1984.\(^{120}\) Each show within this period featured post-performance receptions sponsored by the Atlanta Gay Center. These events ranged from panel discussions to AIDS health education/risk reduction programs endorsed by the CDC to public fundraising in support of AIDS research.\(^{121}\) While these efforts proved mostly successful, Ranson recognizes a common perception of her production that may have stymied its success: *Warren* is an “issue” play.\(^{122}\) Ranson claims that “most producers are not terribly excited about ‘issue’ plays, but sometimes someone is.”\(^{123}\) Of course, Ranson is referring to plays about gay and lesbian affairs, namely Warren Johnston’s AIDS diagnosis. Indeed, *Warren* proved the subject of controversy as Ranson had predicted.

\(^{119}\) Center for Disease Control, Personal letter, Center for Disease Control to Rebecca Ranson, October 18, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

\(^{120}\) Center for Disease Control, Personal letter.

\(^{121}\) Rebecca Ranson, Personal letter, Rebecca Ranson to Bob Korbett, November 26, 1984, 337 MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

\(^{122}\) Rebecca Ranson, Personal letter, Rebecca Ranson to Jack Whitescarver, April 5, 1985, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

\(^{123}\) Rebecca Ranson, Personal letter, Rebecca Ranson to Jack Whitescarver.
Following the play’s initial success, Fred Wilson, a drama teacher at Sentinel High School in Shenandoah, Iowa, obtained a script of *Warren* for the school’s fall production (1988). After announcing the decision to stage the play the proceeding spring, holding auditions in the summer, and thoroughly memorizing lines for dedicated rehearsals, Wilson faced staunch criticism from concerned parents citing instances of obscenity contained in the script. Specifically, the Board of Education held that educating students about AIDS-related complications is critical, but that the subject was not addressed appropriately in a “clinical and preventative way.”

Board member Nancy Lightfoot claimed to have read the play three times noting its poor writing and startling emphasis on the homosexual community – certainly an unequivocally outrageous subject for an AIDS play. Other board members such as Jack Baxton feared the “peer pressure and teasing which could accompany a role as a homosexual or lesbian.” Board member Chuck Morris questioned whether Wilson would be willing to implement a supplementary prologue or epilogue explaining the medical aspects and health

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125 Naven, "Board Discusses.”
126 Ibid
concerns of the one-act play. In an editorial posted in the same newspaper, an unidentified individual returned a copy to the district with the capitalized word “BULLSHIT” inscribed numerous times within the article, thereby rendering parts nearly illegible. The perpetrator also wrote, “can’t believe ‘peouple’ like this exist” with the word “people” noticeably misspelled – a handwritten note from Ranson confirms this. Similarly, Ranson asserts that the perpetrator unduly challenged the writer’s opinion, namely that the Board’s comments were inappropriate and unfounded. Amid the intense controversy, Wilson and the cast decided to cancel the production following the public outcry, marking one of Warren’s most well-known cases of censorship (and perhaps one of the first in AIDS theatre).

Aside from the Sentinel High School cancellation, productions of Warren diffused across the country with relative ease. Nearly two years after Warren’s theatrical debut, Keith Hershberger of the Conundrum Players Theatre in Rochester, New York contacted Ranson: “Thanks for the pleasure of ‘Warren’, for sharing so beautifully his story. After reading the last words, on our front deck overlooking 128 acres of wooded park, I took off my shoes and socks and just stood in our small lawn letting myself connect with the earth. You help us hear our private fears – will I be next? – so well, so gently, lovingly.” In terms of Warren’s characters, Hershberger remarked that “the beauty of these parents, friends, and even Warren himself lend themselves to the audience: Parents will see themselves, friends will look at their own friendships, and the story becomes our own.” Indeed, this adoption of Warren as a ubiquitous tale permeating biographical borders and inserting itself into the hearts of the general public

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127 Naven, “Board Discusses.”
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Keith Hershberger “Conundrum Players: Rebecca Ranson,” Keith Hershberger to Rebecca Ranson, June 20, 1985, 337 MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
132 Hershberger, “Compendium Players.”
cemented its place as an engaging work of art. This appeal undoubtedly enchanted local activists and organizers alike.

To this end, the executive director of theatre at AIDS Rochester, Jackie Nudd broadened *Warren’s* exposure offering the play to a northern audience – a subgroup hitherto unaffected by Warren Johnston’s passing. Having the opportunity to view *Warren* during an International Conference on AIDS in Atlanta, Nudd noticed that “the audience was comprised mostly of community-based directors, who deal with AIDS every day. There was not one of us who as not totally affected by your play. I commend you for bringing the reality, devastation, and humanness of the disease together in your play.”\(^{133}\) Wishing to produce the play in Rochester, Nudd tasked Hershberger with directing the project which eventually materialized during AIDS Awareness Month in October 1985 and endured myriad reproductions until April 14\(^{th}\)–15\(^{th}\), 1989.\(^{134}\) Thus, at the pinnacle of *Warren’s* popularity in the midst of the AIDS Crisis, New York audiences delighted in a gripping southern AIDS drama that preceded the likes of nationally-acclaimed juggernauts: *The AIDS Show* (1984), *As Is* (1985), and *The Normal Heart* (1985).

**Conclusion**

Emotionally stimulating yet comfortably absent from the prevailing narrative, *Warren* failed to compete with critically acclaimed and recognizable AIDS-productions such as *The Normal Heart* (1985) and *As Is* (1985). Aside from the occasional southern reproduction, the most recent being at the University of Baltimore in 2013, Rebecca Ranson’s masterpiece seems the subject of national indifference.\(^{135}\) This neglect was perhaps the result of limited funding

\(^{133}\) Jackie Nudd, Personal letter, Jackie Nudd to Rebecca Ranson, July 17, 1985, 337 MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

\(^{134}\) Nudd, Personal letter.

coupled with the constraints of an emerging subject matter. Yet under these constraints, *Warren* persevered. Given the perceived desolation of the southern theatrical industry, *Warren* remains a testament to the authority of playwrights such as Rebecca Ranson and the enduring nature of a compelling AIDS play.

Inciting an array of feelings from a rampant sense of agony to a brief reprieve of momentary amusement, *Warren* became a staple in AIDS-media through its unrivaled storytelling and charismatic cast instilling an instantaneous relationship between the viewer and the decaying artist occupying center stage. Furthermore, Warren Johnston’s Tennessee heritage and jubilant charm provided a neglected southern gay and lesbian community a hopeful personality with whom they could identify. Audiences felt like they knew Warren; he told their stories with a glimmer of unwavering optimism. His recurrent passing leaves auditoriums in solemn silence trusting that they may one day find some solace – some “beauty and meaning from these ashes.”

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This work is sometimes referred to as "empowering" – empowering pedagogy, empowering theatre...It is a term and a form of intervention often misused so we must understand it properly. Rebecca Ranson is not a superior agent empowering her actors, these people with AIDS. Instead, Ranson uses her knowledge, skills, and resources to clear a space that she and the PWAs enter in mutual risk in order to find their vitality, their lessons, their messages, their power.

-William Alexander, Clearing Space: AIDS Theatre in Atlanta.\(^{137}\)

Following in Warren's footsteps is no simple task – certainly strained by an increasing volume of concurrently produced, nationally-acclaimed northern works. To replicate her first groundbreaking spectacle, Rebecca Ranson embraced innovation, ingenuity, and realistic observations in crafting an unconventional AIDS play featuring concepts commonly associated with recognizable northern plays of the early 1990s; yet Ranson’s 1988 performance marks a thematic conversion from the early AIDS plays chronicling the onset of the crisis to idiosyncratic works dedicated to the fusion of AIDS with experimental performance art. This chapter argues that Ranson’s sophomore AIDS play, Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS (1988), instituted perspectives hitherto unaddressed in Warren-era plays. Moreover, the underlying motivations inspiring Ranson to compose Higher Ground demonstrate a degree of personal commitment to AIDS activism emblematic of her social justice work and unmatched by her northern counterparts. Much like its predecessor, Higher Ground imparts a southern stance on a medium that would soon appropriate its novelty into more popular works; thus, Higher Ground proves a worthy spiritual successor to the pinnacle of southern AIDS plays – revolutionary, heartrending, and criminally overlooked.

**Generational Change**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS theatre transformed profoundly. The progressing decades coincide, albeit imperfectly, with a deviation in dramatic theme and content as conventional first generation plays precipitated introspective second generation forms. Initial reactionary works grounded in immediate observations of the disease coupled with momentous displays of grief, mourning, and death suddenly evolved into plays characterized by satire and camp, questions of gay identity, and evaluations of life in a world plagued by the specter of AIDS. While no concrete date precisely delineates the shift in subject matter, there exists a definitive shift in AIDS narratives. Depictions of suffering, AIDS themes, and recognizable theatrical motifs in Angels in America (1991) differ markedly from Warren, for example. A thorough understanding of these disparate genres is therefore essential to situating AIDS plays within the existing compendium, especially Ranson’s often omitted works.

Theatre professor and AIDS activist, Therese Jones claims, “generally, first generation works are traditional in form, sentimental in tone, and assimilationist in aim;” that is, these performances depict stirring AIDS deaths, attribute strong reverence to the victim, and reject sex as the cultural epicenter of urban gay life – withholding explicit portrayals thereof – in favor of monogamy and traditional familial norms to sway a heterosexual public. Director Anne Bogart adds, “first generation, the disease has just happened. The playwright’s obligation is to present the material, to present the facts, and mourn them, and mourn the situation.” Early AIDS plays such as Warren and As Is (1985) certainly follow this structure.

Warren features a scene in which Warren Johnston assumes a didactic role in AIDS education, informing his family of the physiological strain inherent in the disease. Similarly, Warren’s friend, Sam conveys to Helen the alarming breadth of PWAs relegated to myriad AIDS

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139 Jones, Sharing the Delirium, x.
140 Ibid, x.
wards nationwide.\textsuperscript{141} The performance culminates in a dramatic death and subsequent solemn mourning of the eponymous AIDS patient. In a similar vein, William Hoffman’s \textit{As Is} fixates on the pervasive threat of AIDS deaths with doctors punctuating the concern by reiterating a palpable reality: "The simple fact is that we know little about acquired immune deficiency syndrome."\textsuperscript{142} Moreover, \textit{As Is} edifies the audiences as to the readily available resources for PWAs in explicit references to AIDS support groups, hotlines, and outlets within the New York City AIDS community.

Other plays, such as Larry Kramer’s \textit{The Normal Heart} (1985), elucidate traits inherent in first generation plays retrospectively. \textit{The Normal Heart} institutes a salient sense of remorse for promiscuousness. Ben, the heterosexual brother of the AIDS-diagnosed protagonist, Ned Weeks asserts, “you [homosexuals] don’t understand why there are rules and regulations, guidelines, responsibilities,” blaming Ned’s libertinism as the source of his disease.\textsuperscript{143}

Addressing this sentiment, Professor David Bergman argues,

Kramer’s one alternative to ‘fuck[ing] yourself to death’ is a marriage-like relationship between men, suggesting that gay survival relies on approximating heterosexual behavior. Kramer blames the victims of lovelessness for their own predicament, and their deaths on a life of mindless, unrestrained sexuality. For Kramer, gay sexual behavior is ‘the equivalent of eating junk food’, irresponsible because it disobeys the rules, regulations, and the guidelines that govern heterosexual relations.\textsuperscript{144}

Kramer’s insistence on monogamy implies his intuitive response to AIDS as morbidly pessimistic in imposing fault on PWAs. Nevertheless, the commercial success of \textit{The Normal Heart} as a premiere AIDS play denotes attributes typically synonymous with instinctive negative responses to the sexual promiscuity of PWAs, or merely the perception thereof, as uniquely

\textsuperscript{141} Rebecca Ranson, \textit{Warren}, 1984, MS 1253, “Rebecca Ranson 1943-2017.” Stuart A. Rose Library Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
\textsuperscript{142} William Hoffman, \textit{As Is} (New York: Vintage, 1985).
\textsuperscript{144} David Bergman, \textit{Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 154.
characteristic of first generation plays. The antithesis of Kramer’s intent – overt acceptance of sexual promiscuity and the explicit appreciation of gay bodies – represents exemplary themes found in second generation performances; however, their sole existence proves the result of cultural maturity accommodating a transition in societal discourse regarding AIDS, gay exploitation, and sexual taboo.145

Indeed, second generation AIDS plays designate a radical departure from pedagogical memoirs of recently deceased PWAs and the correlating impulsive reactions; according to Therese Jones, AIDS in second generation works is “no longer an event to be comprehended but a reality to be accommodated.”146 Playwrights draft works seeping with anger, humor, satire, romance, farce, and a spectrum of emotions in an experiment of abstract theatre. Critics confirm this outlook reviewing second generation plays as “defiant celebrations of gay life,” the “pushy pairing of AIDS and entertainment” that effortlessly “mourns the passing of Gay nakedness and sexual freedom with rage and laughter.”147 Cherishing these plays as “blithely satiric,” “eerily realistic,” and “going where no teary-eyed AIDS plays have gone before,” theatre critics recognize the progressing medium which “opposes hierarchical structures, asserts subjectivity, and challenges cultural suppression of sexuality without ‘the whiff of the pathos or bathos that’s dominated most AIDS drama.’”148 Yet, save for select exceptions, the motivations for theatrical innovations seldom align among playwrights.

Perhaps the most obvious, intuitive, and undoubtedly ubiquitous inspiration for the genre shift is the increasing lifespan of PWAs. The emergence of drug treatments such as AZT gave the hope of extended life expectancy of AIDS patients (though not until the “cocktails” of the mid-1990s does the “lazurus effect” become a reality.); thus, “realistic” AIDS plays necessarily

145 Jones, Sharing the Delirium, x-xi.
146 Ibid, x-xi.
147 Ibid, xi.
148 Ibid, xi.
began addressing this reality.\textsuperscript{149} *Angels in America*, for instance, ends with the PWA protagonist, Prior proclaiming “the Great Work” shall continue, affirming his resolution to pursue life with the disease.\textsuperscript{150} Playwrights Wendell Jones and David Stanley advanced the trend in producing *AIDS! The Musical* (1993), “we were taking a cue from *Diseased Pariah News* and David Feinberg and all the other angry queer jokesters who emerged after the ‘seriousness’ of AIDS itself became deadly. We didn’t want to contribute another tired, tired, tired boring tragic AIDS play.”\textsuperscript{151} Whether correlating with medical advancements or a general fatigue regarding the gravity of AIDS tragedies, artists and composes seemed to understand and propagate a notable shift in the storytelling medium.

Years before Tony Kushner, Wendell Jones, and David Stanley, a certain southern playwright acknowledged similar phenomena, compelling her to experiment with the monotonous grief and cookie-cutter sorrow pervading the genre. In May 1988, Rebecca Ranson observed, “I no longer feel that people think as soon as they’re diagnosed that they’re going to lie down and die.”\textsuperscript{152} After attending a local reproduction of *The Normal Heart* at Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre, Ranson noticed the audience “sobbed and sobbed” before promptly exiting, assuming that they had done “what they [needed] to do for AIDS.”\textsuperscript{153} Understandably unsatisfied, Ranson reflected on the societal impact of her inaugural AIDS play, deeming *Warren* "a tremendous catharsis for grieving on some level, but it did not provide anything that I thought got people going. [. . .] We keep letting people off the hook. We keep moving them, exciting them, and then they have had their experience, and it is not going to go anywhere."\textsuperscript{154} Consequently, Ranson

\textsuperscript{151} Jones, *Sharing the Delirium*, 208.
\textsuperscript{152} Alexander, "Clearing Space," 116.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid, 122.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 110.
debuted an innovative and unusual spiritual successor to *Warren* in the spring of 1988 intended to incite palpable AIDS activist movements: *Higher Ground Voices of AIDS*.

*Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS*

A melding of lived experiences and theatrical prowess, Rebecca Ranson’s *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS* incorporates a series of 40 interviews conducted directly with PWAs, their lovers, close friends, and families into a contemporary rendition of gay life during the progressing AIDS Crisis. The cast comprises 28 interviewees rather than trained actors. Of the assortment, 23 are PWAs narrating deeply personal accounts to Nick, a reporter tasked with investigating the impact of AIDS in a southern setting. The resultant interconnected showcase of evolving oral history with recurrent reproductions intrigues theatre historians attempting to classify the play; its status as a plainspoken recital of individual autobiographies defies typical theatre genre. According to William Alexander, “[*Higher Ground*] is a text, a performed play, and it is also the rehearsal with all the other moments around the edges of the production.”

These “other moments” constitute numerous incalculable products of retelling trauma: abrupt stutters, passionate breakdowns, and tenacious at-risk actors resolved to perform their stories despite their deteriorating physical conditions. Yet the organic, unpredictable elements contained in each staging cement *Higher Ground* as an authentic portrayal of a community in anguish.

Since *Higher Ground* integrates 40 disparate interviews spanning a cast of 23, the script contains 24 distinct, separately-titled subplots with occasionally recurring characters, events, and settings that accumulate to fashion a cohesive AIDS narrative. Aside from the opening scene featuring a song and a dual character dialogue, each subplot features characters monologuing to

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156 Ibid, 112.
Nick (occasionally conversationally with other actors present) punctuated by intermittent AIDS support group meetings, each designating the end of an act save for a concluding song completing the final act. The opening dialogue – entitled “Eye of the Storm” – brilliantly sets the play’s tone by posing challenges familiar to PWAs. Two characters, Art and Dean, converse in a pseudo-biographical walkthrough of Art’s experiences as a gay man while simultaneously serving as an exposition to audience members unfamiliar with or previously unsympathetic to the struggles of gay life. Dean claims that Art was “born innocent” which Art confirms; Dean continues, “your mother and father saw you and loved you. You were a tiny innocent baby…there wasn’t any such thing as AIDS.”

Dean probes Art’s upbringing from his childhood development to a pivotal realization in his adolescence. Art claims,

I had feelings about a boy.
I liked his hands and the way he would run.
I liked his eyes and the way they would dance with little lights in them when he was doing something his mother told him not to do.
I liked it when he would talk to ME.

Viewers discover that Art discussed his feelings with his mother and friends, to which Art responds, “Mother said there was something wrong with me…my friend said I was a queer. After a brief introspection, Art expressively cries,

I got taught love was good and then that it was bad.
... I got mad.
Love was only good if it was the right kind
Right was wrong for me.
When I got out of my home, I told everybody I was gay, gay, gay.
I went to bars and drank and had fun.

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157 Rebecca Ranson, Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS, MSS 1253 Ranson, Rebecca, 1943-2017
Rebecca Ranson Papers, Emory University MARBL, Atlanta, GA. The script is a collection of typed pages, many without page numbers. Therefore notes will refer to sections rather than page numbers. For readability, many notes have been consolidated and the number of notes has been greatly reduced.

158 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Eye of the Storm.”

159 Ibid.
Art continues reliving his sexuality and affirming his passionate acceptance of his gay identity. He cherishes falling in love, touching, kissing, cooking supper, renting an apartment and relishing in the joys of life with his significant other. Dean claims, “you were just like other people in love…you went to the movies and had fights and made love. Art confirms this as Dean presses on, “you could walk down the street holding hands;” Art emphatically retorts, “NO!” Dean persists, “you could have an insurance policy together…you could get married, have a publicly acknowledged partnership.” Again, Art replies, “NO!” Finally, Dean asks if Art could merely return home for Christmas with his family, causing a despondent Art to interrupt: “I want to stop here.”

![Figure 7: Johnny Walsh (center) as Nick in Rebecca Ranson’s Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS](image)

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160 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Eye of the Storm.”
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
In the next segment, “Waters of Creation,” audiences acquaint themselves with Nick, a self-proclaimed “neutral” and “objective” reporter boasting “no opinions of [his] own” commissioned to investigate the AIDS epidemic in a southern city, namely Atlanta.¹⁶⁴ In an existential rant, Nick concludes:

I’ve got this idea how we get born into the waters of creation
Ride the rivers of our lives
Then float away
AIDS changes all of that
You’re in the middle of the river
Maybe moving fast with a little sunshine on you
and WHAM
AIDS blows the waters of creation into a thousand fragments.¹⁶⁵

Nick’s first interviewee, Sam operates an AIDS support group to which he cordially invites Nick. In “Inside my Healthy Body,” Sam details his efforts supporting PWAs. Following the sudden passing of a PWA that saved his life years prior, Sam established a support group for men suffering from the disease. He recalls an especially troubling night in which he sought out a PWA who was abnormally absent from the preceding meeting. Upon confronting this particular PWA at his apartment, Sam recounts a startling observation:

I had never touched him before. I helped him dress. He was the thinnest person I’ve ever touched. He couldn’t stand so I lifted him and carried him to the car. He was tiny, like a child in my arms. When we got to Grady [Hospital], he asked me not to stay. He kissed me and thanked me. I kissed him and said I’d see him next week at group. I knew I wouldn’t. He died the next day.¹⁶⁶

The unfortunate truth, Sam recalls, is the frequency at which these deaths occur – “that’s one story out of a hundred,” he mentions moments before admitting that his role in establishing an AIDS support group dispelled a prior disdain for the gay community and cultivated a profound sense of pride in his personal gay identity. He confesses an impossible desire: to endow

¹⁶⁴ Ranson, Higher Ground, “Waters of Creation.”
¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid.
suffering PWAs with his healthy body and an accompanying chance at life. Before Nick’s departure, Sam imparts practical wisdom directed at the audience,

Just write something that will help.  
Just make people understand what these men are going through  
Talk to the guys with no insurance, no friends, nobody who gives a damn.  
And talk to the ones who have money and family and friends and lots of people who do give a damn and can’t do anything but watch.  
Talk to them all and then tell people in this country what is going on and that they need to help.167

The protagonist of the following iteration, Jason explicates Sam’s plea for advocacy in his personal reflection, “Bargaining for Time.”168 Jason’s ardent activism succeeds his recent migration to Atlanta in which his health rapidly declined due to an AIDS-related complex (ARC). At 25 years old, Jason underwent spleen-removal surgery while simultaneously coming out to his mother. Without sufficient energy and physical strength to maintain a job, Jason resolved to dedicate his life to local activist groups such as AID Atlanta.

C.K. adopts a similar lifestyle in “Spinning in Circles of Thought,” albeit through comparably despairing means. As his physical maladies exacerbated, doctors at Grady Hospital advised him to find somewhere else to stay as he was occupying a sole hospital bed and thus diminishing its availability for other patients – certainly a heinous act worthy of immediate dismissal. An emotionally exposed C.K. recalls, “I had no money, no support system and [the doctor] wanted to kick me out. At the time, I thought it would be a relief if I just died. I even considered taking my own life.”169 A similar sense of desolation encumbers Diane in “No Plans.”170 Following a life lavished with abundant sex and drug addiction, the first straight protagonist admits to contracting AIDS through her substantial drug abuse. She notes that her eventful life unexpectedly metamorphosed into a laborious trudge in which she refuses to “make

167 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Waters of Creation.”
168 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Bargaining for Time.”
169 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Spinning in Circles of Thought.”
170 Ranson, Higher Ground, “No Plans.”
any [plans]” nor “think about tomorrow. Likewise, in “After the Glitter,” a wistful drag queen named Wesley reminisces in the elegance and extravagance of his reckless youth, leading the exuberant former partygoer to find love in a similarly glamorous soul – Alfred. The ensuing amicable termination of a nine-year relationship precipitated a tragic revelation:

We haven’t lived together for years but we never lost touch
I was diagnosed and months later Alfred was.  
We talk on the phone all the time now about our medications,  
Our doctors, our AZT feedings, our past.  
I miss the glitter, the pretty people and things, the laughter.171

The following piece, “Support Group #1,” features Sam leading a discussion between Wesley, C.K., and myriad unfamiliar faces. The group begins discussing new medical treatments and the mutually-perceived incompetence of the FDA before a man named Dewitt claims, “I hate being a statistic, one of the masses. This thing I’m doing is MY AIDS and I don’t want to be lumped in a group.” Drawing intense controversy, the group debates the efficacy of communal

171 Ranson, Higher Ground, “After the Glitter.”
action and activism. One member, Bobby, claims that people outside of the support circle must assume that the group promotes constant numbing “depressing sessions” in which members merely “moan and cry.” Yet the group appreciates an emotional outlet. “Even when we cry,” Bobby asserts, “I don’t think it’s depressing. I need to cry somewhere.” After terse conversations regarding the death of former attendees, Dewitt posits, “That’s part of the reason I sometimes want to give up. My family wants me to stay alive more than I do. I wish this whole thing was just me but it’s WE. They are a part of AIDS, too.” Conflict concerning a preference for a lasting life rather than a momentary passing briefly ensues, culminating in Sam concluding that every PWA endeavors to survive as long as possible.\textsuperscript{172}

The proceeding story begins with a monologue by a character present at the support group meeting: Sandy. “Undertow” describes Sandy’s fixation on AIDS: “Most days I can get by without thinking about AIDS more than five or six times. Other days, it’s AIDS, AIDS, AIDS all day long.”\textsuperscript{173} He further admits that another regular group member, Bobby, is his first genuine relationship as he hid his sexuality from his disapproving mother, exclusively dating women to uphold a thirty-year façade. Akin to finding solace in a postponed acceptance of gay identity, Ann Duckworth’s proceeding song, “The Gift,” represents a thematic shift in the second act. The lyrics indicate a callous irony inherent in AIDS:

\begin{quote}
A full life isn’t measured by so many years.
We come and go like the wind sometimes it seems.
Isn’t it ironic in facing death, I’ve learned to live?
and I’m thankful to have found that
no matter how short my time is.\textsuperscript{174}
\end{quote}

Indeed, a lust for life despite confronting imminent death perfectly exemplifies the progressing AIDS narrative encompassed innately within the play. The following dialogue, “Dancing

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{172} Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “Support Group #1.”
\textsuperscript{173} Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “Undertow.”
\textsuperscript{174} Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “The Gift.”
\end{footnote}
Against the Dark,” showcases Nick interviewing Diane and her longtime friend, Joseph while they discuss their lighthearted past, recall a discarded friendship, and provide an effervescent frivolity accentuating the sassy conversation. Diane reminisces, “We’ve had great times together. We’d go out with men. Sometimes I’d steal one away from Joseph and sometimes he’d steal one away from me. That was back in the old days, long before AIDS.” By contrast, Diane confides in Nick a dismal detail about her family upon Joseph’s request: “Oh, yeah, my birthday is coming up. My family is giving me a party. I have these brothers who say things like how they wouldn’t even stay in the same room with someone with AIDS. Little do they know. Before they said that, I was thinking about telling them.” Joseph pompously responds, “What she really said was that she might get a better present if they know.”

The play promptly shifts to an outsider’s perspective. Kate, who offers her “home and love” to HIV-positive children, directs the audience to the marvel of at-risk infants surpassing medical expectations in “Dreaming for the Babies.” Responding to an unconvinced public, Kate claims:

People ask me how I can take these babies knowing they might develop AIDS, knowing they might suffer, and I might lose them.
I always tell them the same thing,
With something like AIDS going on around us, you have to do things that you once thought would be too hard, too much to do
...
In the meantime, my Annie
And my John have people standing in line to hold and love them
Most of the people I know don’t have a whole line of people waiting to love them.

A familiar face recounts an idyllic compliment to Kate’s compassion. “Little Pig is in Trouble” features Dewitt entertaining his nieces and nephews with a fictitious character he impersonates – Little Pig. Lately, however, Dewitt claims that Little Pig needs time alone; “I’m worried about

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175 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Dancing Against the Dark.”
176 Ibid.
177 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Dreaming for the Babies.”
178 Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS, by Rebecca Ranson, Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta, May 29, 1988.
Little Pig, too,” Dewitt alleges, “I think he’s in trouble. I don’t know what might happen to him.” Similarly, in the appropriately titled “Christmas,” former drug addict and PWA Andrew describes AIDS as an insurmountable obstacle obfuscating his familial relationships:

> There was a family reunion a few months ago and I was asked not to come.  
> I had a hard time with it.  
> I really love some of my relatives.  
> I thought about going anyway, forcing the issue.  
> I gave up the idea.  
> What value would there be for me in being with family who make me feel terrible?

Nevertheless, Andrew recognizes the virtue of his time spent working, attending support group meetings, medical programs, and the overarching difficulties of living with AIDS. “I may not be able to count on quantity of life anymore,” he claims, “but I finally know something about quality of life.”

Other PWAs, such as Karl in “Package Deal,” relive a deeply engrained social stigma. After a lengthy confession to his wife, Alice and his brother, Daniel regarding his suppressed sexuality, Karl indulges in one of the most intriguing facets of his career as an army research scientist:

> Funny thing is that AIDS was never mentioned, gay was never mentioned.  
> There are no gay soldiers because the army has no gay soldiers...if you know what I mean. There were about twenty of us in this group, all positive, all in treatment but gay never came up. We were officers.  
> I retired early but “gay” didn’t go on my record.

After discovering that Alice tested negative and Daniel refused tests, Karl divulges into an existential panic, wishing to experience his birthday, Christmas, and his young daughter’s eventual graduation while retaining a realistic outlook. Alice refuses to inform their daughter, refraining her tears; yet this decision only evokes Karl’s sorrow. A brief silence envelops the

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179 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Little Pig is in Trouble.”
180 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Christmas.”
181 Ibid.
182 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Package Deal.”
stage as Nick offers to leave. As an aside, Nick offers a bleak reflection on his progress interviewing Atlanta’s PWAs:

I actually was crying for the values in this country.
People have to be facing death before the important things emerge.
There’s something wrong with that, with us as a people.
And with our views on death.
I don’t understand it but I sure as hell see there’s a problem.\textsuperscript{183}

Meanwhile, Daniel addresses the audience directly outside of Nick’s purview concerning his increasing apprehension surrounding the disease. “AIDS used to be just numbers and I’d never read anything about it,” he recalls, “now, because of Karl, because of the others, I can’t just throw them away, so I stack them on my desk and hope that someday I’ll read them.”\textsuperscript{184} Thus, the first act concludes documenting an array of convincing responses to a gay community stricken with an imminent, yet protracted, death sentence.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Rebecca Ranson (center) portraying Emily in Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{183} Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “Package Deal.”
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
The second act opens with Emily, a social worker assigned to work with PWAs who notices a gradual deterioration in her neighbors. Intimately familiar with the anatomical effects of the disease, Emily presumes her neighbors to be PWAs gently succumbing to the disease; she notices that one of her neighbors curiously and abruptly disappears from their routine daily greetings. The other neighbor confines himself to solitude, sacrificing employment for a calm passing. One morning, Emily spots older individuals with Alabama license plate perusing his house and an accompanying yard sale the following weekend. Without speaking a word to either neighbor, the elderly woman – presumably the mother of one of the deceased neighbors – stationed at the yard sale, or anyone else in the neighborhood, Emily concludes:

It’s there, AIDS is
You don’t have to work with it to see it
It’s everywhere.
Open for the public to see
I’m holding those men in my memories
I don’t know why.
There is so much about this that I don’t understand.  

Themes concerning safeguarding the mementos of recently departed PWAs also appear in the following scene, “Flea Market.” After his lover Cliff perishes from AIDS complications, Jesse describes Cliff’s parents rummaging through Jesse and Cliff’s home, seizing any belongings they considered property of their deceased son, regardless of Jesse’s emotional attachment to them. According to Jesse:

My smiling lover that I adored was dead and these horrible
People were ripping the rest of him away from me.

... I work in the buddy program now.
I tell every PWA I meet to do something about writing down
What they want, to do a will, to save those left behind from
Something they would never have happen.  

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185 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Emily.”
186 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Flea Market.”
Cast members reunite onstage for “Support Group #2.” Attendees include Karl, Jason, Andrew, Sandy, Bobby, Dewitt, Wesley, C.K., Joseph, Sam, as well as a few unfamiliar faces. Brief introductions precede Sam announcing the topical agenda he planned for the meeting: sex. Drawing sardonic remarks – “What’s that? I’ve forgotten;” “was it fun;” “it’s something from out of the past, something we used to do;” “I remember liking it a lot!” – Sam immediately edifies that he intended the meeting to provide a comfortable discussion about individual problems surrounding sexuality. A range of responses emanate from the somber group: Karl regrets posing the burden of AIDS on his wife and daughter; Jason contemplates permanent abstinence; Wesley questions if anyone would want to hold him in the first place; Joseph romanticizes finding the love of his life, a feat in which Andrew remains unsuccessful; and Sandy shares a disheartening consideration, “I think a lot of people don’t see us as being sexual anymore. They think we’re done with that part of our lives.” Sam assumes that most members still maintain strong sexual interests, garnering mixed replies. Joseph notes that his sexuality has become exceedingly intimate, “I used to sleep with someone to get to know them. Now I get to know them and then maybe develop a sexual relationship.” The meeting ends as the members dream of an idyllic, escapist sexual future.

Members disperse offstage except Bobby who monologues about his former partner and current friend, Gary in “Best Person There Ever Was.” His AIDS diagnosis, coupled with a history serving in the Vietnam War, justifiably unnerved Bobby; Gary, however, suppresses Bobby’s deepest fears. According to him, “[Gary]’s just there all the time. I don’t want to do this alone and I’m lucky enough not to have to. I have him. He won’t hear of my dying so we talk about living and we make these plans for what’s the next thing we’re going to do. It’s great. I

187 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Support Group #2.”
188 Ibid.
really do think he’s about one of the best people who ever lived.”\textsuperscript{189} A similar sentiment surrounds Millie in “The Words Never Came.”\textsuperscript{190} A nurse recalling her time tending to Steve, a calm, quiet, and unassuming PWA whose only dream was visiting the Grand Canyon, Millie describes the simple bliss of holding Steve’s hand and sharing wisdom in a serene, sorrowful parting. Millie resolves to volunteer at AID Atlanta after discovering that both men and women may assist in AIDS activist efforts.

Figure 10: Kathie de Nobriga (left), Chris Minor (center), and Stebbo Hill (right) as Rachel, Keith, and Barry from Rebecca Ranson’s Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS

A novel addition to the chronology, “The Big A” documents Barry receiving word that his ARC progressed to AIDS. He informs his lover, Keith and his wife, Rachel of his diagnosis concurrently – a conspicuous aberration from the typical distant recollections thereof. Locked in a lustrous embrace, Keith and Barry freeze as Rachel exposes personal anxieties:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[189] Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “Best Person that Ever Was.”
\item[190] Ranson, \textit{Higher Ground}, “The Words Never Came.”
\end{footnotes}
I don’t know what I’ll do without Barry so I’m taking the attitude that he’ll be here for a long time, that some new discovery will come along and save him. People tell me that’s a form of denial. I don’t care. I have to have hope. I can’t survive any other way.191

Dewitt returns for an introspective monologue about conquering the disease entitled “Running.” A fitting allegory for the myriad races in which he used to compete, “Running” details Dewitt’s initial rejection and outright acceptance of his sexuality despite its potential to disrupt the relationship with his family and the memory of his deceased mother. He vows to unabashedly express himself, his condition, and his innermost insecurities to his grandmother and sister:

I want them to understand something about me and to know that I’m that person they loved, that little boy Dewwy that couldn’t do anything wrong in their eyes.
I am still that little boy, back like I used to be.
This AIDS is running after me but I’m running faster.192

Similarly, Stephen recalls his disapproving Southern Baptist family in “S Blank X.” As the title implies, Stephen’s upbringing disregarded any potential mention of sex, much less the potential of gay sex. He recalls feeling disillusioned, uncomfortable, and depleted prior to his AIDS diagnosis. Yet the lethal disease provides him a vivid sense of self-appreciation and a desire to express his iridescent personally unabatedly.

Murphy’s monologue, “Life in the Gray,” contemplates the abject alienation inherent in the transition from ARC to AIDS. He recalls feeling exasperated as friends and family proved the products of AIDS apathy, “I mean the first time or two in the hospital everybody shows up because they think you might die. When you don’t, they get tired of coming around.”193

191 Ranson, Higher Ground, “The Big A.”
192 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Running.”
Meanwhile, a sprightly PWA, Eric, determines a solution to Murphy’s disconcerting revelation: activism. In his eponymous interview, a 54-year-old Eric reflects on a dynamic life in which he considered becoming a Catholic priest, raised 3 sons throughout 17 years of marriage, indulged in the revelry and debauchery of a 1980s party lifestyle, and dedicated his post-diagnosis life to advocating for PWAs to religious institutions. According to Eric, “I’ve been able to lambast them on their sexual theology both regarding women and gays, and their AIDS silence. My letter attacking Cardinal O’Connor in New York was a classic!!” Eric concludes his lively monologue with a parting prayer to “end this holocaust.”

Likewise imbued with a similar Catholic upbringing, Charlie, a “buddy” volunteering to connect with PWAs, recalls his experience relating to victims of a terminal illness. Fostering his first bond with a drug addicted schizophrenic, Charlie gifts Robert a Santa Clause doll and money for cigarettes citing a general bewilderment as to how he should relate to someone whose lifestyle is as dissimilar to his own as Robert. A dismal discovery, Charlie later finds that Robert passed on clutching the Santa Clause doll close to his chest. Meanwhile Charlie offers his second buddy, Ralph an opportunity to view Rebecca Ranosn’s *Warren* as a method of connecting, yet Ralph never seemed to spare the time. The pair eventually kindled a heartfelt relationship while Ralph withered away in a hospital bed. Ralph’s grandmother cremated and subsequently returned his ashes to his Mississippi home as Charlie ruminates the efficacy and progression of his activism. He finally concludes, “I’m on my third person now knowing up front that he may die. Knowing that Ralph and Robert died gives me something I can give to the next man.”

A concluding song – the same which opened the play – encases the theatre as the entire joins in a

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195 Ranson, *Higher Ground*, “Charlie.”
deeply personal “Song of the Soul,” thereby pursuing an emotional, spiritual, and with vital medical advancements, physical higher ground.196

**Higher Ground as a Second Generation Southern AIDS Play**

Identifying southern themes in *Higher Ground* is a considerable task – certainly more laborious than an analogous examination in *Warren* given its nature as a consecutive series of principally unrelated interviews. Nevertheless, by interweaving local recollections and personal testimonials, Ranson captures congruous elements of southern culture as her previous play, albeit to a far lesser extent. Disapproving Wileys and Florences and acute sexual repression represent the norm for characters in *Higher Ground* from Art’s mother deeming “something wrong with him” to Stephen recalling an upbringing devoid of sexual education, much less gay sex. A few characters accentuate themes of parental discontent by intertwining it with another familiar southern theme: strong religious affiliation. Eric claims he wanted to be a priest prior to combating theological attempts to silence PWAs while Stephen attributes his parents’ shared dissatisfaction to Southern Baptism. Furthermore, Charlie’s explicit reference to *Warren* serves equal parts as a homage to Ranson’s and a thematic reference point by which to ascertain southern identity.197

*Higher Ground*’s most apparent connection to the South lies in its allusions to local geography. A play based on the lived experiences of PWAs in Atlanta will naturally contain markings of southern landmarks; however, the specific locales mentioned coalesce southern identity with themes of AIDS activism through a lens familiar to Ranson as she attempts to inspire social justice in each staging. When Charlie recalls Ralph’s grandmother returning his ashes to her Mississippi home, audiences would assuredly connect the scene with Warren’s plea

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196 Ranson, *Higher Ground*, “Song of the Soul.”
197 Ranson, *Higher Ground*, “Charlie.”
to die in a nostalgic southern setting. Likewise, when Emily, a character inspired by Ranson, observes Alabama license plates approaching her neighbors house, she realizes that the disease pervades state boundaries affecting not just PWAs but their friends and families across the nation. When she explains that “[AIDS] is everywhere, open for the public to see,” Emily invokes Ranson’s startling realization following her production of *Warren* and the ensuing public response, namely that the disease impacts all individuals regardless of sexual orientation. Furthermore, Ranson deftly imbues this stirring revelation with an accessible call to action: AIDS activism.

Several characters featured in the performance express resolutions to volunteer at local institutions. Sam conducts AIDS support meetings for PWAs perplexed by their evolving social and physical conditions; Millie and Jason each individually elect to volunteer at AID Atlanta; and Kate offers a home to HIV-infected children. A microcosm of these concrete steps to promoting institutional involvement, Ranson provides an insight into the preferences of PWAs to implicitly condemn certain commonplace practices, thereby advocating for their disposal.

Perhaps the most impactful instances concern the legislative and cultural stigma surrounding AIDS. At the play’s inception, Dean questions whether Art could marry his lover, purchase insurance together, and publicly announce their indelible bond to which a dejected Art responds by asking Dean to end the interview. Directing the audience implicitly, Sam instructs Nick to comfort the disregarded AIDS victims, those without insurance, friends, or family before clarifying that Nick, and therefore the audience, should do the same to all victims but remain cognizant of societal pressures and familial neglect. Similarly, Karl recalls an unspoken military rule which amounted to propagating the myth that no gay men exist in the army, therefore no PWA servicemen exist. When Jesse recalls Cliff’s parents seizing his belongings, depriving his

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living lover of the last remnants of a life together, audiences recognize the precarious circumstances surrounding seemingly mundane interactions with PWAs, their friends, families, and emotional supports. Put simply *Higher Ground* primes audiences for dealing with the ongoing impact of *AIDS* on the living rather than momentarily mourning the departed — a decidedly distinctive characteristic of second generation plays.

Offering valuable insight into the changing attitudes of PWAs in accordance with AZT treatments and similar medical advancements, *Higher Ground* serves as a roadmap connecting first generation anxieties with second generation self-appreciations. Although the play omits direct, firsthand character deaths (a markedly second generation characteristic), the entirety of the play’s first act exudes first generation themes of loss, grief, desolation, and permanent, depressing uncertainty. Sam remembers the sudden loss of a regular group meeting attendee, leaving him disconsolate and temporarily inconsolable. Similarly, C.K. recalls a life devoid of insurance, money, support systems, or empathetic hospice care in which he contemplated taking his life. Diane compounds the devastation, refusing to make future plans out of the bleak uneasiness and sheer weight of an AIDS diagnosis. In the final piece before Sam’s first support group meeting, a crestfallen Wesley yearns for “the glitter, the pretty people and things, the laughter.”

Characters in the first act reiterate depressing notions of AIDS as an immediate and inescapable death sentence — undoubtedly familiar to fans of *Warren, The Normal Heart*, and *As Is* — until they congregate for Sam’s first meeting. Numerous outbursts in the first meeting signify a surprising shift in internal beliefs about the disease. Dewitt expresses disdain for being “a statistic, one of the masses” while Bobby challenges the conception that an emotional support system equates to perennial grief. The meeting ultimately concludes with Sam asserting the

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199 Ranson, *Higher Ground*, “After the Glitter.”
groundwork for second generation sentiments, that each PWA aims to survive an extended meaningful life.

The second act focuses on Sam’s wish, documenting cases of PWAs searching out meaning despite their debilitating disease. Ann Duckworth reveals the ironic theme which would pervade second generation plays: “in facing death, I’ve learned to live.” Meanwhile, Diane and Joseph incorporate an encompassing sense of mirth in their sarcastic conversation about sexual history and familial disapproval, thereby showcasing a brief tonal shift emblematic of second generation works. Moreover, characters such as Kate and Millie find meaning in compassion and AIDS activism. Likewise, Andrew claims that AIDS has sacrificed the quantity of life for guaranteed knowledge about the quality thereof. The entirety of the second support group meeting revolves around discussing facets of gay life other than AIDS. When Sam announces the proposed topic of sex, attendees quickly feign ignorance and insert levity into an expectedly morbid meeting. The meeting concludes with members fantasizing about the future of their respective sexualities as if to signify the potential for pending delight – an unmistakable shift towards optimism.

The third act emphasizes each character’s plight to survive the debilitating disease. Upon discovering her husband’s diagnosis, Rachel asserts that she “[has] to have hope.” Dewitt finally admits to his family that he is a PWA that although AIDS is chasing him, “[he]’s running faster.” Stephen bests his religious upbringing and discontented parents to express self-love and acceptance. Eric and Charlie, meanwhile, discover the solution Rebecca Ranson cleverly embedded to combat the perceived meaninglessness of post-diagnosis life: mobilizing public action. Indeed, the cornerstone of the play, one of its most prevalent themes, and the issue

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200 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Second Act Opening.”
201 Ranson, Higher Ground, “Third Act.”
202 Ibid.
resulting its composition, a coordinated public response proved notably absent following first generation productions. Ranson recognized this and crafted a play deliberately designed to promote public action in AIDS activism.

The decision to include disparate accounts of lived experiences featuring PWAs as well as the friends and families thereof instead of professional actors ensured that audiences received an accurate portrayal of the local AIDS epidemic. While first generation plays such as *Warren* focus on an individual character death, second generation plays such as *Higher Ground* focus on an entire community struggling to survive a debilitating disease. The shift in scope mirrors a desired correlation with activist efforts within and outside of the gay community. AIDS is not *their* problem; it’s Atlanta’s problem; it’s the South’s problem; it’s America’s problem; it’s the world’s problem.

**Conclusion**

Experimental, unconventional, unexpected, and grossly overlooked, *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS* marks an irrevocable shift in the southern theatre industry. Ranson drafted an oral history, a play, a recital, and an emotional call to action. In doing so, she streamlined the typical AIDS play, paving the way for *Angels in America, AIDS! The Musical*, and numerous avant-garde, second generation works; yet, aside from a distinguished theatre historian recently reviving its limited popularity, *Higher Ground* remains underappreciated.²⁰³ Perhaps the play’s greatest fault lies within its most notable strength.

Since *Higher Ground* boasts a cast of PWA interviewees, reproductions of the play are virtually impossible to implement without the entire cast present. Should Ranson have chosen to reallocate roles, the evanescent blips and unexpected tears inherent in reliving trauma would be

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²⁰³ Alexander, "Clearing Space," 116-120.
lost. Thus, *Higher Ground* may represent a lived history more so than a conventional play, a pedagogical lesson on the contemporary state of the AIDS Crisis. Nevertheless, such an innovative, influential work merits review, critique, and intense scholarly debate to comprehend the multifaceted nuances of its inimitable execution and accompanying effect on the medium— in the words of William Alexander, “we need to talk about this play differently.”204
What people are often really saying when they drag out the "preaching to the converted" critique is: "I'm tired of having angry black men, scary women, and shameless fags disturbing my post-theatre dinner!" Even more dangerously, within the byzantine workings of oppression culture this dismissive can also be a method for members of any addressed community to silence the heat and danger of a message that just maybe hits too close to home. We believe that the work of those who commit to the "new cultural politics of difference" will unsettle the force of the systems that sustain the regulatory regimes of power which insist on positioning us as marginal, abject, and in light of AIDS, disposable.

-Tim Miller and David Román, *Preaching to the Converted*205

Despite a thorough investigation of southern AIDS theatre during the height of the AIDS epidemic, innumerable pressing questions remain: Why did *Warren* and *Higher Ground* fail to achieve the same national acclaim and elite status of perennial academic discourse as *The Normal Heart* and *As Is*? How could numerous activists overlook a playwright as prolific and enthralled with social justice movements as Rebecca Ranson? How should audiences envision the South in the overarching AIDS narrative? These issues, of course, result from a disease that persists as the subject of intense political scrutiny, thereby fundamentally altering the ways in which individuals envisage the AIDS Crisis and its corresponding depictions on stage.

The politics of AIDS are deeply intertwined with a struggle of remembrance. Much like the advertisement of urban centers in gentrification projects throughout New York City, individuals in power tend to understate the gravity of the AIDS Crisis – often they neglect the legions of gay men and women that passed in favor of promoting their ensuing inner-city vacancies. Sarah Schulman aptly describes gentrification of gay men and women in a way that relates well to the politics of remembrance, especially regarding AIDS:

The replacement of deaths that don’t matter with deaths that do. It is the centerpiece of supremacy ideology, the idea that one person’s life is more important than another’s. That one person deserves rights that another person does not deserve. That one person deserves representation that the other cannot be allowed to access. That one person’s death is negligible if he or she was poor, a person of color, a homosexual living in a state

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of oppositional sexual disobedience, while another death matters because that person was a trader, cop, or office worker presumed to be performing the job of Capital.\footnote{Sarah Schulman, \textit{The Gentrification of the Mind}, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012)47.}

The notion of “human replacement”, assigning disparate values to individuals based on sexual orientation and physical condition, pervades the entirety of the AIDS Crisis manifesting in the religious realm, popular culture, and national politics.\footnote{Schulman, \textit{Gentrification}, 52.} Reverend Jerry Falwall positing that “AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals;” \textit{Designing Women}’s Julia vigorously refuting that “the good thing about AIDS is it’s killing all the right people;” and President Ronald Reagan’s communications director deeming AIDS “nature’s revenge on gay men” indicate a prevalent debasement of PWAs considered expendable by a significant portion of the public.\footnote{Allen White, "Reagan's AIDS Legacy / Silence Equals Death," SFGate, January 27, 2012, 1, accessed April 26, 2018 & Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, writer, "Killing All the Right People," in \textit{Designing Women}, CBS, October 5, 1987.}

The conception of a “better” replacement population causes increasingly discrete sexual practice. As upper-class heterosexuality normalizes in the once marginalized community, homosexuality, promiscuity, and the viral specter of AIDS become chastised until eventually achieving cultural taboo status. Lower-class men and women, dying of AIDS without proper medical coverage or hope for a cure, may have had their condition exacerbated by the growing demand for real estate, higher rents thereof, and the inflated cost of living surrounding the area (leaving less money for already scarce pharmaceuticals).\footnote{Schulman, \textit{Gentrification}, 52-60.}

Aside from environmental stressors and class oppression, gay men and women also felt explicit oppression from being denied service in restaurants to outlawing public displays of affection, even in the more liberal metropolitan areas of New York. The public’s stigmatization of gay sex places the burden of AIDS on the gay community. It’s \textit{their} problem. Although over 80,000 people died of AIDS in New York City by 2008, their passing often goes widely
overshadowed. Where is the grand societal push for public action following one of the deadliest modern epidemics? Why, instead, did the public blame the same individuals that received a viral death sentence? Schulman attributes the difference – at least partially – to the way in which gay activism is structured: organizations such as ACT UP demanded accountability from a disquietingly apathetic nation.210

Schulman’s argument presents a cautionary tale to the AIDS theatre industry. Her contention, the “gentrification of the mind,” asserts that a heteronormative hegemony has sculpted public discourse surrounding AIDS and the general conception thereof.211 Any deviation from this structure precipitates resounding indifference. How many PWAs drafted plays, films, or any rendition chronicling the severity of their condition only to have their efforts disregarded, discarded, or simply lost in their sudden passing as ashamed families filled dumpsters with queer ephemera? The deliberate abolition of remnants of the AIDS crisis and the denial of its ongoing effects fundamentally alter impressions of AIDS history, especially media history.

Astute readers, theatre aficionados, and anyone born in the 1980s may have noticed this project’s hitherto flagrant omission of a prominent AIDS play: *Rent* (1996). *Rent*’s exclusion in an essay aimed at exploring southern AIDS plays, in part through thematic contrasts with critically acclaimed northern counterparts, initially appears nothing less than a blatant oversight. Yet *Rent* – a doubtlessly marvelous, amusing, and touching theatrical spectacle in its own right – poses salient problems to AIDS activists. Debuting on January 25th, 1996 to universal acclaim, *Rent* solidified itself as a Broadway masterpiece. Jonathan Larson’s New York tragedy captivated audiences with a dynamic cast of characters that seem to perfectly exemplify the youth and vigor of a troubled bohemian community. After a single year, *Rent* had amassed over

211 Ibid, 52-60.
20 honors and awards including a Tony Award for “Best Musical” and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Despite its overwhelming popularity and critical success, Rent’s production proves problematic; its most overlooked flaw is also its most detrimental – Rent was plagiarized.

In her book, Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America, Sarah Schulman contends that Larson based the “theme, plot, stock characters, and settings” of Rent directly on her 1990 novel, People in Trouble. Rather than taking legal action (and potentially ending her career by becoming “the woman who sued Rent”), Schulman details her struggle viewing an unofficial adaptation of a novel she had written six years prior; specifically, she claims that her anger stems from Rent’s egregious portrayal of PWAs and its altering of her original interpretation in order to appeal to a heterosexual audience by centering cisgendered, white, straight men.

Schulman asserts that Rent silences individuals in the gay community by regarding certain aspects of gay culture as socially acceptable while condemning the explicit – oftentimes more accurate – facets of gay life such as sex, homophobia, harrowing coming-out experiences, body issues, and protracted familial disapproval among others featured in her original story. She concludes that “we are in a very tender moment when society is making a transition in its understanding of AIDS from lived experience to packaged image, when Rent is selected over Diamanda Galás’s Plague Mass, Derek Jarman’s Blue – indeed when Rent is selected over a novel with the same characters, events, and dynamics that does not lie about the power differentials between heterosexuals and homosexuals.” She deems Rent a product of a

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212 "Rent Tony Awards Info - Browse by Show," Broadway World.
214 Schulman, Stagestruck, 1.
215 Ibid, 2-5.
216 Sarah Schulman, Stagestruck, 146.
perceived “fake public homosexuality” that satisfies the gay community’s emotional need while remaining palatable to heterosexual consumers.\textsuperscript{217}

Schulman addresses this concern by analyzing \textit{Rent} in a comparative context, relying on congruous media depictions of gay men and women, primarily those suffering from AIDS. She transcribed visceral emotions in a scathing review of \textit{Rent} published in \textit{The New York Times} on February 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1996 – three weeks after \textit{Rent}’s Broadway debut. By that time, \textit{Rent} had garnered universal critical acclaim; two critics from the \textit{New York Times} gave it perfect reviews dubbing it a “masterclass in emotional playwrighting” and “stunning” in its careful representation of “unconventional issues.”\textsuperscript{218} While her review occupied the same front-page spot as the previous two, Schulman’s showcased an unrealized issue hidden beneath the themes of disease, death, and loss. According to Schulman, \textit{Rent}’s writing is inauthentic, uninspired, and problematic for the portrayal of AIDS in theatre – its score riddled with "generic upbeat pop music," and its lyrics no more emotionally gripping than "an ad for Diet Coke."\textsuperscript{219} One of only two negative \textit{Rent} reviews in New York publications, her piece questions why Roger, the PWA protagonist, is overtly characterized as unambiguously straight while leaving the outwardly gay characters with minor subplots in a story centered around AIDS.\textsuperscript{220} Other media portrayals of PWAs such as \textit{A Question of Mercy} and \textit{Philadelphia} complicate the issue by portraying the protagonist as a person struggling with AIDS, divorced from queer community structures, who seeks help from a heroic straight person.\textsuperscript{221}

Schulman’s critique of \textit{Rent} and the ensuing implications thereof demonstrate a set of heteronormative standards governing the entertainment industry. Her bold claim that the musical

\textsuperscript{217}Sarah Schulman, \textit{Stagestruck}, 146.
\textsuperscript{218}Ibid 12.
\textsuperscript{220}Schulman, "Rent Review."
\textsuperscript{221}Schulman, \textit{Stagestruck}, 12-15.
masterpiece, *Rent*, not only plagiarized her work but adjusted it to appeal to a predominantly heterosexual public addresses a distinct problem in the entertainment industry: should playwrights and directors alter intimate AIDS-based narratives to reach a broader audience? Schulman's response is nothing less than an outright emphatic rejection as such accommodations distort the reality of the AIDS Crisis. The benefits of maintaining an authentic narrative reflective of the realities of PWAs during the AIDS epidemic outweigh any costs inherent in refusing to satiate a heterosexual hegemony to their disgust and accompanying ostracization. Tim Dean argues that gay subcultures embracing social taboos necessarily arise in the entertainment industry because of the same ostracization. Yet, the notion that gay cultural aspects and entire genres of plays featuring accurate depictions of a grieving gay community must confine themselves to an audience of their own is undoubtedly distressing. Dejectedly fitting, social dismissal plagued by years of muted outcries aptly describes the experiences of countless gay individuals and PWAs during the AIDS crisis.

Perhaps the most astonishing origin of PWA neglect stems from mainstream theatre critics and – paradoxically – gay men and women allegedly jaded by witnessing repetitive content, namely community-based gay and AIDS-related performances. Actor Tim Miller expounds on the issue,

Mainstream theatre reviewers, for example, often dismiss queer artists who address queer issues for queer audiences for having a limited scope of address. Generally these critics see community-based work not as theatre but as propaganda; queer theatre, from this perspective, has little or no artistic value and queer audiences have little or no critical acumen. And yet queer spectators, too, participate in this kind of conjecture. Work that is explicitly directed toward a queer audience and performed in a community-based or queer-friendly venue is underattended, undervalued, and mocked—by lesbians and gay men—for its alleged naivete or predictability.

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223 Miller and Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” 172.
The ability to mobilize support for PWAs through AIDS plays seems diminished by Miller’s observation. An overarching apathy constricts playwrights to a niche audience, most of whom presumably comprehend the urgency of the disease before the curtains draw open. These individuals, however, often divert attention to other demographics asserting that AIDS activists and artists are “preaching to the converted” which Miller ridicules as a dubious defense at best. Consequently, he dismisses it outright, deeming its proponents unwilling or otherwise incapable of confronting hegemonic structures intent on silencing minorities. Ironically, in his critique of the apparent shortsightedness of mainstream theatre and ineffective AIDS activism, Miller overlooks perhaps the most disconcerting aspect contained therein: a prevailing disregard for the South.

Every issue discussed previously from replacing and conforming AIDS narratives to widespread public apathy doubles as a suitable descriptor of the southern theatre industry but to far greater magnitudes. This project primarily focused on Rebecca Ranson’s plays, albeit not the initial intention. One might expect an inquiry into AIDS theatre throughout the South to provide eclectic accounts from myriad urban centers with historically diverse populations – New Orleans, Birmingham, Memphis, or the like. Unfortunately, there is seldom reputable documentation of southern AIDS-based plays existing aside from Warren, Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS, and a few evanescent productions by Ranson in conjunction with S.A.M.E.. The lack of well-documented plays may be the result of a lack of national and state funding which in turn precipitated fewer performances throughout the South.

Indeed, evidence of financial strain appears throughout theatre advertisements around Atlanta. The most explicit instance, a newspaper article published on January 28th, 1989 in

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224 Miller and Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” 172.
225 Ibid, 172.
Creative Loafing features the headline “S.A.M.E. needs more money, time.”\textsuperscript{227} Similarly, Ranson’s familiar Seven Stages Performing Arts Center – a theater dedicated to promoting new playwrights and grassroots productions of plays – released a local entertainment newspaper referencing an anemic theater budget in an article from October 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1990. The article titled “A Savage Wit Rages Against Tragedy of AIDS” focuses on Tim Miller’s portrayal of “a savagely funny gay man in early ’80s Manhattan.”\textsuperscript{228} However, the opening lines of the piece suggest a problem analogous to that of previous advert: “Those aesthetic jellyfish at the National Endowment for the Arts may have denied him funding, but it’s awfully hard to resist performance artist Tim Miller.”\textsuperscript{229}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{seven_stages_article.png}
\caption{Seven Stages newspaper article, “A Savage Wit Rages Against Tragedy of AIDS” featuring Tim Miller}
\end{figure}

Further indicating funding issues, the Atlanta Theatre Coalition published a pamphlet from 1993-1996 imploring Georgia citizens to donate to theater programs to “help prevent the

\textsuperscript{228} Steve Dollar, "A Savage Wit Rages against Tragedy of AIDS," \textit{Seven Stages News} (Atlanta), October 19, 1990.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
new Dark Ages.” A boldfaced toll number accentuates the plea: “there is a definite void without art. It’s like a long, dark tunnel into which many great things in our lives can disappear overnight. DON’T LET IT HAPPEN.” Given that these donation requests correlate with an uptake in grassroots theatre programs, this advert suggests a lack of public funding for southern theater programs during the AIDS Crisis. This may explain why numerous AIDS-related southern plays were locally funded – they had to be.

Figure 12: Fundraising flyer from the Atlanta Theatre Coalition

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230 Atlanta Theatre Coalition, "Help Prevent the New Dark Ages. Support the Arts,” advertisement, 1993-1996. S.A.M.E. Collection MSS 1015, Box 6, Folder 4, Emory University MARBL, Atlanta, GA.
231 Ibid.
A mere lack of funding, however, cannot justify the considerable disparity in AIDS-related productions between the North and the South given the numerous northern community-funded plays resulting from the same lackluster public arts funding (Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*, for instance).\(^{232}\) Instead, it seems that a penumbra of factors coalesced in an already prejudiced environment, thereby impeding the aspirations of southern playwrights with Rebecca Ranson being the apparent outlier. Ranson’s position on the board of S.A.M.E., significant involvement with Atlanta’s Seven Stages Theatre, endorsement from the CDC, and dedication to social justice assuredly aided her in facilitating productions and subsequent nationwide reproductions of *Warren* and the experimental composition of *Higher Ground: Voices of AIDS*. What if she had not been a gay activist; had not witnessed her dear friend succumb to AIDS; her experience in the San Francisco Ward 5B failed to embolden her sufficiently; her occupation displaced her from an Atlanta-based theatre willing to stage gay productions; her works faced acute political censorship prior to their debuts; PWAs and activists snubbed *Warren* upon its release; or Ranson had drastically altered her original intentions to appeal to a broader audience? Perhaps the existence of truly *southern* AIDS plays would remain a mystery, confined to the same desolation and annihilation of numerous drafts and half-plays lost with their composers during the AIDS Crisis.

\(^{232}\) Miller and Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” 170.
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