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"THE PARTY'S OVER": RECOUNTING THE PAST IN AMERICAN AIDS PLAYS

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the use of the past in regard to the gay sexual culture of the 1970s in three AIDS plays: Robert Chesley's *Jerker* (1986), Victor Bumbalo's *Tell* (1993) and Michael Kearns's *intimacies* (1989). The themes explored—celebrating the sexual freedom of the past against contemporary criticism, commemorating places where gay men could meet for sexual encounters, and a sex continuum joining the busy nightlife of the past to the stern "here and now" of AIDS—stem from memory. Sex is only possible as a past activity and narrated as such in these plays, making them at the same time "obituary plays," because they mourn sexual culture along with specific people, but also "memory plays," because the memory that permeates them also omits some details, all the while magnifying others, in ways different from the plays of Tennessee Williams, who invented the term.

RESUMEN:
Este artículo analiza el uso del pasado en relación con la cultura sexual gay de los años setenta en tres obras sobre el SIDA: *Jerker* (1986) de Robert Chesley, *Tell* (1993) de Victor Bumbalo e *intimacies* (1989) de Michael Kearns. Los temas explorados—la celebración de la libertad sexual del pasado frente a la crítica contemporánea, la conmemoración de los lugares donde los hombres gay podían reunirse para tener encuentros sexuales, y un continuo sexual que une la ajetreada vida nocturna del pasado con el severo "aquí y ahora" del SIDA—surgen de la memoria. El sexo sólo es posible como actividad pasada y se narra como tal en estas obras, lo que las convierte al mismo tiempo en "obras necrológicas" porque lloran la cultura sexual junto con personas concretas, pero también en

> "obras sobre la memoria," porque la memoria que las impregna también omite algunos detalles, al tiempo que magnifica otros, de forma diferente a las obras de Tennessee Williams, que inventó el término.[1]

Political, social and theatrical changes during the 1960s in the US allowed for a larger freedom in the theater, concerning both form and content. In turn, this freedom favored an unprecedented exploration of gay-themed plays. These plays, written and staged in the 1960s and 1970s explored the perspectives of being gay in a big city in the "here and now," the city usually being New York, where most of American theatrical activity also took place. Playwrights seemed more concerned at the time with issues of representation than gay activism: indeed, gay representation in the cinema and television was minimal; creating gay characters for the stage with a past and a future (Tennessee Williams's earlier gay characters rarely had the latter) reflected the contemporary experience of homosexuality. Especially off-off-Broadway's subversive and underground nature allowed for fully elaborated characters, perhaps also as a response to the American novel of the 1950s where, according to Georges-Michel Sarotte: "[…] if the character is more than a sketchy outline, he will also be heterosexual" (Sarotte 24). This current started shifting in the early 1980s with the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic.

The earliest AIDS plays like Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat* (1984) and William M. Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) still focus on the "here and now" while taking the AIDS factor into account. The latter provides a panorama of the struggles of a seropositive character to adapt to the new circumstances (social, medical, financial and sexual) he is faced with, while the former is a dystopian fantasy of HIV positive men paying for assisted suicide to escape AIDS. At the time of its staging, *Night Sweat* was deemed by the critics as "ugly" and "insulting" (Román 55-57) even though its final message, like the one in *As Is*, is rather optimistic, i.e. that the nightmare of the epidemic is only temporary. Others, like Larry Kramer in *The Normal Heart* (1985)—a play *à clef* about the founding conditions of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, an early AIDS service organization—imputed AIDS to promiscuity and advocated for identity politics that later led to ACT UP activism.

[1] Translation provided by the editors

As the years went by and the number of deaths attributed to AIDS kept rising, the majority of authors mourned in their plays the loss of lovers and friends. Among these "obituary plays," there are paradigms of mourning not just for specific people but the whole of a sexual culture that was coming to a close: sex was minimized in gay-themed plays and in popular culture at large from the 1990s onwards (Moore xxi-xxviii). I will discuss herein the use of the past to demonstrate how theater distanced the vibrant sexual culture of the 1960s and 1970s as a sort of "paradise lost," in its attempt to incorporate AIDS. I will analyze two plays, Robert Chesley's *Jerker* (1986) and Victor Bumbalo's *Tell* (1993), as well as a monologue from Michael Kearns's *intimacies* (1989), borrowing, where necessary, examples from other contemporary plays, such as Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1992) and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991/1992). AIDS plays do not constitute a movement but rather a network of similar movement and evolution, as the social and medical conditions of AIDS progressed. Examples from other plays will provide insight and different viewpoints from which to consider the issues discussed in this article.

CELEBRATING THE SEXUAL FREEDOM OF THE 1970S

Among the safer sex practices explored in AIDS plays, *Jerker or The Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty* focuses on phone sex. The telephone calls take place between two men—J.R. and Bert—in their respective bedrooms in San Francisco. The mise-en-scène of the split stage is minimal: beds, nightstands, telephones and J.R.'s crutches, as he had been injured during the Vietnam War. J.R. had obtained Bert's number during a previous anonymous encounter between them which Bert has forgotten altogether. Up to a certain point, the content of the calls is highly explicit (the "elegy" is, after all, "pornographic" as the subtitle indicates), intended to arouse both men and bring about solitary orgasm. However, solitude sparks some affection between them and sexual roleplay is followed or totally replaced by (bedtime) stories from the past. During the twelfth call, Bert coughs frequently onto his pillow. This is the last call he answers, although his part of the stage, lit from the neon outside his window, suggests he is still alive. J.R. keeps calling, only to be greeted by Bert's answering

machine message. Worried, in one of the messages he leaves, he gives his number so that Bert can reach him and confesses being in love with him. The last call does not even go through; Bert's telephone line has been disconnected and his part of the stage is now dark: he is dead.

In most of the twenty telephone calls Bert and J.R. play out masturbatory fantasies with highly-elaborated scenarios. All of them take the past as their starting point and as their subject matter, thus prioritizing the role played by memory. As J.R. says: "A friend was telling me yesterday: when he beats off? He fantasizes it's four or five years ago, before… He can't even fantasize he's doing what he wants to do with another man unless it's before… all this" (Chesley 100). As many other plays attest, like Harvey Fierstein's *Safe Sex* (the central part of his homonymous trilogy, 1987), there is a very clear "before" and "after" the outbreak of AIDS. Most—if not all—of the characters from 1984 until at least 1992 await their death, the final "game over," as if, in retrospect, they had been treading on thin ice all their lives. This anachronistic signifying process is what *Jerker* tries to oppose in a rather unorthodox way, as can be observed in this excerpt:

> BERT: […] He was a hot guy, and… lots of fun and… sweet, beautiful. And horny. *(Nearly in tears.)* And fuck it all, *there's nothing wrong with that!*
>
> J.R.: I didn't say there was.
>
> BERT: Yeah, I know—no, you didn't. But, you know, everyone's putting it down nowadays. *(Mimicking.)* "The party's over! The party's over!" *(Own voice.)* Well, fuck it all, *no! That wasn't just a party!* It was more, a *lot* more, at least to some of us, and it was *connected* to other parts of our lives, *deep* parts, *deep* connections. I'm not gonna deny that drugs were part of it, and I *know* for some guys it was—or it turned out to be—hell. But that's not the whole story. For me, for a lot of guys, it was… *living*; and it was *loving*. Yeah: *It was loving*, even if you didn't know whose cock it was in the dark, or whose asshole you were sucking. And *I don't regret a single moment of it: not one.* (Chesley b98-99, emphasis in original)

This passage is what John M. Clum calls an "aria of reminiscence": "[…] a convention of AIDS dramas, the 'aria of

reminiscence,' in which the Character With AIDS celebrates his past promiscuity or laments the impersonality of the urban gay lifestyle" (Clum 55). Bert tries to justify this lifestyle centered around anonymous sexual encounters by insisting on the deeper levels of connection they had created for him, echoing Michel Foucault, who said in an interview in 1982: "We [homosexuals] need to understand that our desires, through them, give rise to new forms of relationships, new forms of love and new forms of creation" (Foucault 1554). In his last play, *Hold* (the third part of his trilogy *Dog Plays*, 1990), Robert Chesley further develops this angle, discussing the idea of a dead community united through AIDS, where the notion of a Whitmanesque comradeship, suggested in *Jerker*, is more prominent:

> LAD: At *last!* My brothers! my brothers are there! Standing by me on that mountain! They are *there!* Their deaths—*(pause)* in the city, their deaths were too *many*, *far* too many; the terror was too great, time gnawed at my heart. Even through years and years of their deaths, day by day, I could not comprehend, could not see! But *now!* These are the men I've loved, and now they stand by me on that rock! I know each one! (Chesley a153, emphasis in original)

The *Dog Plays* describe a series of renunciations Dog has to go through as an AIDS patient. In *Hold* he is alone with the ghost of Lad, his dead lover, who is preparing him through the dialogue for the final renunciation: death. In this excerpt he describes an experience he had (through an episode of dementia), where he meets and finally comprehends the bonds linking him—as well as Dog—to the community of men who died from AIDS-related conditions. In *The Inoperative Community* (*La Communauté désœuvrée*, 1983), Jean-Luc Nancy notes that: "If the *I* cannot say that it is dead, if the *I* disappears in effect in *its* death, in that death that is precisely what is most proper to it and most inalienably its own, it is because the *I* is something other than a subject" (Nancy 14). In regard to both plays and considering their relevance to death, Nancy's remark outlines a community constituted by the steady decline of the "I" through the degeneration of the body (*Jerker*) and/or dementia (*Hold*). The community formed in the past that Bert describes is dying in *Jerker* and is dead and one in *Hold*.

Furthermore, this excerpt from *Jerker* seems like a direct response to Larry Kramer's very popular *The Normal Heart*, where the central character, Ned Weeks (coinciding with Larry Kramer since this

is a play *à clef*), is trying to spread a controversial message of sexual abstinence as the key measure in order to contain the epidemic. Alongside, Ned criticizes relentlessly the sexual mores of the 1970s, as Larry Kramer had done in his novel *Faggots* (1978): "We have simply fucked ourselves silly for years and years, and sometimes we've done it in the filthiest places" (Kramer 94). Robert Chesley opposed this strategy and the subsequent judgment of the past, not only in plays like *Jerker*, but also through letters to the New York Native, a gay journal of the 1980s and 1990s, where he wrote: "I think the concealed meaning of Kramer's emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men deserve to die for their promiscuity. ...Read anything by Kramer closely. I think you'll find that the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin is death" (cited in Shilts 108). In stark contrast to Kramer's demonization of sex, *Night Sweat*, *Jerker* and even the nihilist *Dog Plays* all celebrate sex, even in the face of impending death. In *Jerker*, during the last calls, Bert's answering machine has a different message from the one heard in the earlier ones; it's a snippet from Judy Garland's recording of George Gershwin's "Do It Again":

> So as long as you've begun it,
> And you know you shouldn't have done it...
> Oh, do it again— (Chesley b115)

According to John M. Clum: "The voice of Judy Garland, whose death was a catalyst for the Stonewall riot, sings a song about forbidden sex. The lyric that once meant sex that was naughty—wrong—now hints at sex that is literally deadly. Always a song of defiance, it now affirms sex even in the face of death" (Clum 60). The choice of this song echoes and reaffirms Bert's ending line in the excerpt cited above: "*I don't regret a single moment of it: not one.*"

In addition to defending sex against abstinence, Robert Chesley introduces a process of deconstruction, shifting from reconsidering the collective, communal past to the personal. As the phone-calls go on, phone sex and sexual fantasies are progressively replaced by sexual stories from Bert's and J.R.'s pasts: the content of the calls is different but the subject matter remains the same—memory. Sex exists only as a memory of past activities: the "before" can never be repeated. So what's left when all the sexual tension is released call after call? The last story that J.R. narrates is a spectacular dream from his childhood that ends with him, his brother

and a stranger sleeping together in the same bed, in each other's arms. That's as far as the fantasy goes, because as he says:

> […] when I was a kid, I didn't know what men *did* together—I mean sexually. I *really, really* wanted to *touch* men, be with them, smell them, be in bed together… I guess it was the *affection* I wanted.[…] What I'm trying to say is that when I was a kid that's as far as I got in my fantasies: just into bed, because I didn't know there was sex, didn't *know* it consciously. (Chesley b110, emphasis in original)

In this decreasing itinerary, gay sexual desire is slowly deconstructed to reach (and articulate) its most primitive form. Soon afterwards Bert dies because, as in the *Dog Plays*, this progression to nothingness also entails death. Or as Harry Kondoleon puts it in his play *Zero Positive* (1988), where one of the characters mishears "seropositive" as "zero positive": "The zero for the infinite nothingness and the plus sign like a cross on a grave" (Kondoleon 228). In this "obituary play," the "helping hand" may also be the one that closes the casket.

COMMEMORATING CRUISING SPOTS

AIDS has also set sex in the past in Victor Bumbalo's *Tell*. Three characters, named plainly Man, Visitor and Nurse, sit on stools and recite their lines instead of acting them out. The Man is an AIDS patient and it is inferred that the play takes place in his hospital room, although the set is bare, except for a floor lamp. The stage directions also state that "There is an absence of color" (Bumbalo 216). The Visitor narrates a sexual encounter to the Man, but their discussion is often interrupted by the Nurse, who lights the floor lamp, suddenly pausing the story. The stage directions do not specify whether the Visitor is following a premeditated scenario, past remembrances or recalling a recent event; the Man—the addressee of this story—interjects with "I remember," indicating his participation; it is not clear, however, what his role may be (or may have been) in the Visitor's narration.

When the sexual tension builds up to a real encounter between the two men, the Man puts on a hospital gown and connects himself to an IV drip, and for a few moments the actors act out their lines (Bumbalo 228). To the extent that for all AIDS patients the perspective

was almost always death, this peculiar moment of mimesis introduces the image of an AIDS patient as a sexual being, while denoting the impossibility of it, since the encounter is again abruptly interrupted by the Nurse. The Visitor leaves (Bumbalo 231) and, progressively, the Nurse narrates sexual memories of her own while masturbating the Man (Bumbalo 234). Again, he interjects with "I remember" and what he remembers is desire as life-force, beyond sexual orientation and gender roles.

Tell suggests that sex is not anymore a matter of bodies, but rather an enactment of memory, imagination and words. According to the author, "If health is a balance between body and mind, then when the body is being attacked it is almost an obligation of the mind to try to restore the balance. It is an obligation to remember and imagine and tell" (Bumbalo 215). *Tell* is a "memory play" to the degree that even though the Visitor's narration may refer to specific events, the "I remember"'s it draws from the Man are triggered by the sum of his own encounters. But unlike Tennessee Williams's "memory plays" where "the scene is memory" (Williams 399), in *Tell* memory only belongs to the past and cannot be acted out—hence the empty stage and the colorless set. These stage directions make it a universal "memory-of-cruising play," acting as a potential closing chapter of a network of plays—especially of the late 1970s—that discuss cruising casually like Robert Patrick's *T-Shirts* (1978), Doric Wilson's *A Perfect Relationship* (1979) and Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1978/1979) among others.

Like other plays of the early 1990s, *Tell* hints at the HIV positive/AIDS patient as a sexual being, through the short scene where the Man connects himself to the IV drip. This indicates a shift in time from the past of the sexual encounters to the "here and now" of AIDS but also foresees that patients will finally retrieve their sexual lives through treatments. This hypothesis is not affirmed directly in *Tell* but in plays like Paul Rudnick's romantic comedy *Jeffrey* (1992) that takes Larry Kramer's call for abstinence to the extreme. In Rudnick's play, Jeffrey is terrified by AIDS and decides to abstain from sex altogether in order to remain seronegative. When he meets Steve, a seemingly healthy, seropositive man he is attracted to, his fear of AIDS paralyzes him. With the help of friends, he reaffirms his sexual nature and orientation, finally overcomes his fear and builds a relationship with Steve. Steve is one of the first seropositive characters in AIDS plays that claims his right to sex in spite of his HIV status. This is probably a consequence of the commercialization of AZT in

1987, which slowed down the progress of HIV for some patients and helped reduce social stress.[2] In turn, the theater responded with plays like Victor Bumbalo's earlier play *Adam and the Experts* (1989), which dramatizes the hysteria around AIDS, the similarly-minded *Jeffrey* and Doug Holsclaw's *The Baddest of Boys* (1992), a hilarious AIDS comedy, while a few other plays started discussing the sexual past if not yet reclaiming it.

One of the well-known plays to discuss the sexual mores of the 1970s is Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. In one scene from *Perestroika* (the opus's second part, 1992), Louis is with Joe at Jones Beach in New York and gazes across the ocean: "The winter Atlantic. Wow, huh? There used to be guys in the dunes even when it snowed. Nothing deterred us from the task at hand" (Kushner 202). Following the example of never-ending memorials, Louis eulogizes bygone cruising spots—in this case Jones Beach—while observing the consequences of AIDS. Homosociability and/or sexual activity had once transformed these places into busy hubs of attraction, now deserted by those who were (for the time being) HIV negative, out of fear, shame and/or guilt. What is more, in 1985 the authorities closed down the bathhouses as a preventive measure against AIDS, while real estate in places with a strong gay presence sometimes changed hands: this is the case in Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991) where Sally inherits a house on Fire Island from her brother David who died of AIDS. Harvey Fierstein's *On Tidy Endings* (1987, last part of his *Safe Sex* trilogy) discusses a similar situation. Arthur inherited half of the apartment in which he lived with his dead lover, Collin, but Marion, Collin's ex-wife, is thinking of contesting his will because she believes in the superiority of a heterosexual marriage over a homosexual relationship. The conflict between Marion and Arthur is resolved in Fierstein's usual reconciliatory tone, but it reflects the social reality for a lot of gay men evicted from their houses from the families of their lovers who died of AIDS.

Going back to *Perestroika*, Joe, who accompanies Louis, is a neophyte: his religious and political beliefs have made him repress his homosexuality. Having recently come out of the closet, his very limited experiences place him on a different level from Louis; in this case, he

[2] Due to a probable optimism about the future and more effective treatments that started to flourish when AZT was approved by the FDA, Steve in *Jeffrey* and Prior in *Perestroika*, both staged in 1992, are among the first characters in AIDS plays who are not awaiting death.

is unaware of the recent past experienced by a large portion of gay men in New York:

> LOUIS: Nothing deterred us from the task at hand.
> JOE: Which was?
> LOUIS: Exploration. Across an unmapped terrain. The body of the homosexual human male. Here, or the Ramble, or the scrub pines on Fire Island, or the St. Mark's Baths. Hardy pioneers. Like your ancestors. […] And many have perished on the trail. (Kushner 202)

In establishing a local micro-geography of homosexuality, Louis draws a parallel between the exploration of the male body and that of the American territory ("unmapped terrain"). Expansion into the unknown West and the Gold Rush in California laid the foundations for homosociability, as evoked in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and also observed in the all-male cowboy communities that came to symbolize American masculinity (Gibson). Louis seems to imply that the two types of exploration coincide, with homosexuality tightly woven into American history, one facet of what "national themes" suggest in the subtitle of *Angels in America* ("a gay fantasia on national themes"). The selection of words—"exploration," "task," "hardy pioneers"—indicates both toil and determination, and implies a notion of progress in this sexual quest. Prior, the seropositive prophet in the play, keeps reaffirming the necessity of progress by refusing the angels' offer and reiterates it in the epilogue of the play, only this time in relation to gay culture:

> This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated, and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. (Kushner 280)

By means of the ambivalence that pervades *Angels in America* (Savran), this passage not only foresees some relief concerning the epidemic but also perhaps a restoration of the sexual culture that Louis commemorates. In this sense, *Angels in America* goes a step further in comparison to *Tell*, which views cruising only as a past activity. This may be because of the very different routes these two playwrights have taken: *Angels in America* is written like a film script, with a cut-up, montage-style kind of structure with very specific information and announces its universal message at the finale,

whereas *Tell* is more vague to allow for free identification from the part of the audience and thus—by excluding details—becomes universal.

FROM RECREATIONAL DRUGS TO AIDS MEDICATION

In 1989 Michael Kearns wrote and staged *intimacies*, followed by *more intimacies* in 1990, two series of monologues, to give voice to those excluded from AIDS plays and from the discourses about AIDS in general, including sex-workers, drug-addicts, religious fanatics and ex-cons. Having directed *AIDS/US* (1986), where thirteen people of different walks of life impacted by the AIDS crisis share their experiences with the public, *intimacies/more intimacies* seemed like a natural follow-up, only this time the monologues were written and played out by one professional actor, Michael Kearns himself (Román, 73-83). Besides that, only half of the participants of *AIDS/US* were seropositive (some of whom died during the run), whereas in *intimacies/more intimacies* all of the characters are seropositive/AIDS patients. The direct inspiration for the monologues came from a scene Michael Kearns witnessed in the subway:

> In the bowels of New York City's subway system, I saw a man: fortyish, his head swathed in bloodied bandages, wearing fuzzy bedroom slippers and a hospital identification bracelet. Clearly gay and in the throes of dementia, he was part stand-up comic, part drag queen, and part social activist. Like many "crazy" people, his diatribe resonated with the truth. I thought to myself, "What would it be like to be him?" (Kearns 237)

This scene inspired Denny's opening monologue. Denny is an HIV positive drag-queen, suffering from dementia—hence the drag-name Creme Dementia. His/her monologue is written like a stand-up comedy routine but the jokes are grim. The repetition of two small phrases provides rhythm to a piling-up of outrageous episodes from his/her life: "I was sooo demented" and "Calvin Klein underwear." The first one facilitates this process because it allows for a higher level of absurdity with each repetition, for example: "If you think I'm demented now, honey, you should have seen me then. I was sooo demented… I was sooo demented, I shot up crystal and went to brunch with the family on Mother's Day" (Kearns 240). The second one is more obscure but the following passage allows us to decipher its meaning:

> When [my old boyfriends] came in me, they stayed in me. They left souvenirs: damaged childhoods, fucked-up adolescence, disapproving parents, and outraged wives. I don't believe their bodily fluids gave me AIDS. We been poisoned by something but not bodily fluids. We been poisoned by hate, hate from moms and dads and uncles and aunts and priests and nuns and school systems and mayors and the Moral Fucking Majority and Miss Jesse Helms and Calvin Klein underwear and the Reagan Fucking administration. Bodily fluids gave me life, honey. Hatred is what's killin' me. (Kearns 241)

The sex continuum described as productive in this passage ("bodily fluids gave me life") is frequently interrupted by homophobic sources: families, the educational system but also politicians like senator Jesse Helms, a well-known homophobe and the Reagan administration who did nothing to put an end to the epidemic during its early days. In this context, the reference to Calvin Klein underwear probably refers to its first advertisement, which was a giant billboard on Times Square in 1982. What this reference draws is a morbid irony between the homoerotic images of a normalizing, athletic, seemingly healthy masculine body and bodies like Denny's: sick and disintegrating. In a strictly capitalist way of thinking, Denny's body belongs to the past—it exceeds the production/consumption cycle—and what is threatening it is the accumulation of hatred in the present. The punchline of this stand-up routine sounds bleak:

> Tried to get into Studio One the other night but they didn't like my hospital slippers. Get real, girleen. So I stood outside. Some big burley number with a sissy voice told me to split. "Listen here, you overripe piece of fruit, I'm a safe sex advertisement; havin' to look at me is better than any of those keep-your-tongue-outa-buttholes lists. You'll have to carry me away, Mr. Big Stuff." [...] Listen, honeys, windin' up like this was not my life's ambition. When I was young and pretty — younger and prettier — I went to the parties with the gay elite, the gay effete. I took the same drugs and sat on the same cocks. Some are just luckier than others. (Kearns 242)

The cult of the young and athletic body exalted by Calvin Klein underwear intrudes here as an entry point into a rough nightlife where the reversed image that Denny represents has no value. Similarly, "young and pretty/younger and prettier" belongs to the past and no longer fits the required image. However, following the previous excerpt,

through the fluxes that permeate the same bodies ("same drugs," "same cocks"), Denny designates a community that is both decadent ("effete") and exhausted (from the Latin *effetus*) and thus joins the past to the present of AIDS ("the same drugs," meaning the same recreational drugs but also the same anti-retroviral treatment).

CONCLUSION

American AIDS plays drew their subject matter heavily from the past because the future was filled with grim perspectives. The contemporary situation was so unprecedented and its effects were so radical that memory seemed the only thing these characters could hold on to. In this sense, these plays are "memory plays." Unlike Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* though, *Jerker*, *Tell* and *intimacies* maintain a less poetic, more aggressive approach, mainly due to the political implications in each one of them.[3] However, as Tennessee Williams says: "Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches […]" (Williams 399). To the degree that sex was predominantly discussed in plays of the before-AIDS era and also blamed for the outbreak of the epidemic, in these plays sex does takes center stage. Still, sex is not possible anymore, so it is narrowed down to desire, which is the common denominator in these plays. Nevertheless, memory does not equate nostalgia: it is a live—albeit ghostly—network, documenting gay desire. Thus, in recreating the past to make sense of what little time they have left, these characters bid farewell to an entire sexual culture, now that the party is indeed over and will not resume for several decades. After *Angels in America*, most gay-themed plays shifted back to the "here and now": some characters were still dying from AIDS but others explored the possibilities and consequences of living with HIV (as described in Doug Holsclaw's *The Baddest of Boys* and Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, as well as in Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*). It seems as if the

[3] For some scholars like Alan Sinfield, in most AIDS plays, "Individual problems seem to require individual solutions, and there seems to be no place for the assessment of power structures and public policy" (Sinfield 321). Indeed these plays discuss individual cases but their scope, through the magnitude of the epidemic that binds them together almost as a movement, is much larger. Plays like *Angels in America* discuss power structures (through Roy Cohn) and denounce public policy, even if they do so intermittently because it is not their primary subject.

magnitude of the AIDS epidemic and the decimation of the gay population heightened the urgency for life, making the "here and now" more important than ever.

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