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► To cite this version:

Charalampos Keivanidis. “The Party’s Over”: Recounting the past in American AIDS plays. ”Game Over!”: U.S. Drama and Theater and the End(s) of an American Idea(1), May 2022, Madrid (Spain), Spain. hal-03932608

HAL Id: hal-03932608

<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03932608>

Submitted on 10 Jan 2023

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“The Party’s Over”: Recounting the past in American AIDS plays

By 1984, when Robert Chesley’s *Night Sweat*, the first full-length play about AIDS, was staged, HIV and its modes of transmission had been identified. It comes as no surprise then, that authors turned to the sexual freedom of the 1960s and 1970s as source of inspiration. Some, like Larry Kramer in *The Normal Heart*, imputed AIDS to promiscuity and advocated identity politics that led to ACT UP activism. Several others, mourned the loss of lovers and friends in their plays. Among these “obituary plays”, there are paradigms of mourning not just specific people but the whole of a sexual culture that was coming to a close. I will discuss the use of the past in two such plays: Robert Chesley’s *Jerker* and Victor Bumbalo’s *Tell*, as well as a monologue from Michael Kearns’ *intimacies*.

Among the myriad safer sex techniques explored in AIDS plays, *Jerker or the Helping Hand* focuses on phone sex. In most of the twenty telephone calls between Bert and J.R. masturbatory fantasies are played out by both. All of them take the past as their starting point, so memory is a key factor here. 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.

As other plays, like Harvey Fierstein’s *Safe Sex*, attest, there is a very clear *before* and *after* the outburst of AIDS. Most — if not all — of the characters from 1984 onwards 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, in this excerpt for example:

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*.

As the phone-calls go on, phone sex is progressively replaced by sexual stories from Bert’s and J.R.’s past: 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 on 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.

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*, Robert Chesley’s last trilogy, this progression to nothingness, also entails death. Or as Harry Kondoleon puts it in his play *Zero Positive*, “The zero for the infinite nothingness and the plus sign like a cross on a grave”. In this “obituary play”, the “helping hand” may also be the one that closes the casket.

AIDS has set sex in the past also in Victor Bumbalo’s *Tell*. Three characters, named simply 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 specify that “There is an absence of color”. The Visitor narrates a sexual encounter to the Man but their discussion is often interrupted by the Nurse who lights the floor lamp indicating a sudden pause to the story. It is not clear whether the Visitor is following a scenario, past remembrances or recalling a recent event ; the Man, however, the addressee of this story, often interjects with “I remember”.

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 I.V. drip and for a few moments the actors act out their lines. To the extent that AIDS patients' perspective was almost always death, this peculiar moment of mimesis introduces the image of an AIDS patient as a sexual being, all the while indicating the impossibility of it, since the encounter is abruptly interrupted by the Nurse. The Visitor leaves and progressively, the Nurse narrates sexual memories of her own while masturbating the Man. Again, he interjects with "I remember" and what he remembers is desire as life-force, beyond sexual orientation and gender roles.

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". *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", 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 — especially 1970s — plays that discuss cruising casually.

In 1989 Michael Kearns wrote and staged *intimacies* and *more intimacies*, two series of monologues, to give voice to those excluded from AIDS plays and the discourse about AIDS in general: sex-workers, drug-addicts, religious fanatics, ex-cons and the like. The inspiration for the monologues came from a scene he 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?"

This scene inspired the opening monologue, Denny's. 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 provide 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”. The second one is more obscure but the following passage allows for a case:

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.

The sex continuum described as productive in this passage (“bodily fluids gave me life”) is frequently interrupted by homophobic sources. In this context, the mention of Calvin Klein underwear probably refers to its first advertisement — a giant billboard on Times Square in 1982. What this mention 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. The punchline of this stand-up routine sounds very cynical:

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.

The cult of the young and athletic body that Calvin Klein underwear exalts, intrudes here, as an entry point into a hard 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 medication).

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 so radical, that memory seems the only thing these characters can hold on to. In this sense they are “memory plays”. The term was, of course, coined by Tennessee Williams to describe *The Glass Menagerie*. Unlike his play though, *Jerker*, *Tell* and *intimacies* maintain a less poetic, more aggressive approach, mainly due to the political implications each of these plays contained. 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 [...]”. To the degree that sex was predominantly discussed in plays of the *before-AIDS* era and also blamed for the outburst of the epidemic, in these plays it takes center stage. Still, sex is not possible anymore, so it’s narrowed down to desire that is the common denominator here. Nevertheless, memory does not equate nostalgia: it is a live — though 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.