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Essay

Charalampos Keivanidis

- 1 With a new virus spreading and lockdowns established all around the world, analogies have been drawn recently between the fear the AIDS epidemic triggered in the early 1980s, and the Covid-19 pandemic. What has sparked these reactions is a feeling of helplessness, in the absence of known treatments or vaccines coupled with the speed at which the SARS-CoV-2 is spreading. History, however, reminds us that the hysteria around AIDS only arose when HIV and its modes of transmission were identified: until then, AIDS was considered a strangely sexual-orientation-sensitive disease hunting for gay men.¹ As such, it was largely dismissed by governments (notably the Reagan administration) and overlooked by health authorities until it was obvious that any sexually active individual was potentially concerned. Even then, funding for research and campaigns against unprotected sex acts were not comparable to the global mobilisation against SARS-CoV-2: to the degree that AIDS was linked to—especially gay—promiscuity (Sontag 16 et seq.), contracting HIV came to be considered a matter of sexual choices.²
- 2 Culturally, it is not yet clear what the long-term conditions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic will be. For the time being, the changes in the performing arts concern mainly representation specifics (the shift from the stage to the screen). While no such adjustment was necessary during the 1980s, many gay playwrights, choreographers, directors, set designers and performers were lost to AIDS: these voices were silenced forever and the American stage impoverished by this loss. Nevertheless, AIDS has spun a considerable number of plays over the years, predominantly gay-themed. These plays also discuss distancing, although of a different kind compared to the one we are experiencing at the moment.
- 3 Even though social distancing was never an issue in the 1980s, AIDS plays recount how, for many gay men, social isolation was markedly different from what it is today: AIDS patients often lacked the support networks available for most of us these days. Several

plays dramatise this aspect, even though the “PWA” (Person with AIDS) is usually surrounded by lover(s) and friend(s).³ In fact, very few plays depict and/or comment on social isolation and stigmatisation: among them, Michael Kearns’ *intimacies/more intimacies* monologues (1989/1990) depict characters beyond the well-off, gay male WASP image of the PWA (inadvertently) showcased in most AIDS plays.⁴ Nevertheless, what was distinctly different for gay men during the early stages of the AIDS epidemic was not so much the social but rather the sexual form that distancing took. Vaccines and treatments may restore in the near or not-so-near future the social interaction that the Covid-19 pandemic has thwarted, but HIV was identified four years after the death of the first AIDS patients; misinformation, homophobia and ultra-conservative pseudo-theories prevailed on what was labeled as a “gay plague”; AZT, the first treatment, effective on only a fraction of HIV-positive patients, was not commercialised until 1987. By then, the number of the infected—through sex, blood transfusions, and shared needles—had skyrocketed. Complying with medical recommendations, “sexual distancing” became a survival technique for gay men; in contrast to the promiscuity of the 1970s, the number of partners was limited, safer sex precautions were taken, engaging in sex acts with no or very little physical contact was introduced; not engaging in sex at all was also proposed by plays such as *The Normal Heart* and Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey* (1992). In addition to all this, AIDS plays also reveal how sex came to be viewed as an activity of the past. Taking as a case study Robert Chesley’s plays, in particular *Jerker*, we can examine AIDS-inflicted “sexual distancing” as a both physical and temporal phenomenon.

- 4 Following the present context, interiors in Robert Chesley’s plays on AIDS, might be seen as a “gay lockdown”: the Coup de Grâce club in *Night Sweat* (1984); J.R.’s and Bert’s apartments on the split stage in *Jerker* (1986); the leather bar where Dog meets Buck among inanimate dummies as patrons in *(Wild) Person, Tense (Dog)*—the first of the Dog Plays trilogy (1990); all these are loci of separation, exile, and seclusion, vaguely foreshadowing (or echoing) the AIDS concentration camps feared in Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* or Jesse Helms’s homophobic outbursts in the 1980s.⁵ What makes them specifically gay are the different speeds at which gay and straight worlds—if we could clearly determine and juxtapose them—operate: while the decimated and secluded “gay world” holds its breath, the “straight world” defines the surrounding landscape, the pace by which everything is measured. The indifference with which the “straight world” considers HIV and AIDS, in spite of the sentiment of urgency the plays try to instill, illustrates the difference in speed.
- 5 Early AIDS plays like William M. Hoffman’s *As Is* and *Jerker* are multi-layered obituaries, not only of individuals but also of gay sexual culture. These two plays escape the (social as well as theatrical) conservative mindset that blamed 1970s gay sexual mores for AIDS when the first cases of HIV were identified; this mindset progressively silenced public discourse on gay sex for many years (Moore xxi-xxviii). *Jerker* focuses solely on sexual culture and draws on memory to rewrite sections of its history as if to preserve them. The whole title, *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*, summarises the play accurately—albeit ironically. Twenty telephone calls take place between J.R. and Bert in their respective bedrooms, somewhere in San Francisco. The only props besides the beds, the nightstands and the telephones, are J.R.’s crutches, a reminder of his Vietnam years. According to J.R., he and Bert met in a bar where Bert gave him his number; in order to preserve some anonymity, J.R. remains, until the end,

the only one who can call. Bert does not remember any of this but respects J.R.'s wish. The content of these calls is highly explicit (it is, after all, a "pornographic elegy", as the subtitle eloquently states), destined to bring about solitary orgasm for both men. However, before long, roleplay fades into bedtime stories. During the twelfth call Bert coughs regularly into his pillow and from the thirteenth onwards, J.R.'s calls go straight to the answering machine, although the neon from outside the window lights up Bert's part of the stage, indicating that he is still alive. Worried, J.R. leaves his number so that Bert can reach him and confesses being in love with him. The twentieth call does not even go through; Bert's line has been disconnected and no lights come up on his area: he is dead.

- 6 *Jerker's* plot, as well as that of the *Dog Plays*, depends entirely on memory. The new sexual regime that imposes physical and psychological distancing between the characters rekindles their memory which becomes, henceforth, the linchpin of their encounters. They extract from it sexual fantasies played out by both but, depending on their needs, other elements emerge, notably two stories: one is a brief encounter between Bert and a stranger; the other, narrated by J.R., is a cross between dream and fairy-tale. The theatricality of their exchanges resembles a return to the sources of theatre, an inverse itinerary, from roleplay to recital, even though the stories in *Jerker* are far apart from dithyrambs in honor of Dionysus—though only seemingly. This backward movement allows Robert Chesley to cultivate an obscure terrain, between play and narrative, on sex but without sex ever taking place between Bert and J.R.
- 7 During the ninth call and for the second time, Bert is disheartened: David, one of his friends, is at the hospital. Thus he outlines David's biography—another obituary—for J.R., concluding in an apologia of how he chose to live his sexuality, not unlike how Bert and many other gay men have lived theirs:

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 98-99)⁶

- 8 By defending his philosophy of love and sex, Bert introduces a perspective of depth in order to counter the flippancy that some, like Larry Kramer, perceived in that lifestyle (in his 1978 novel *Faggots*, for example). Corporeality still prevails in the narration of Bert's encounter with a stranger and seems to pave the way for a deeper communication: in concluding, he recalls "[...] one of the most wonderful connections I think I've ever had with another person, one of the most beautiful acts of love I think I have ever known" (107). In spite of the consumerism we might see in the proliferation of sexual encounters, the disregard of an exclusive relationship (no matter how satisfying the contact may have been) could be defined as anti-capitalist. This is a constant in the *Dog Plays* as well, where homosociability—social interaction between gay men—is even more pronounced, reinforced by a sense of brotherhood, a recurrent

theme in both *Jerker* and the *Dog Plays*—in short, a Whitmanesque dimension of longing and belonging, of a new, AIDS-triggered comradeship.

- 9 Diverging from the heteronormative conceptions one often finds in AIDS plays of the mid-1980s, *Jerker* proposes not a novel, but certainly marginal, paradigm on establishing a relationship, sexual or other, no matter how ephemeral it may be. Michel Foucault gave a global perspective when, in an interview about gay sexuality and identity politics, he stated that, “We [gay men] have to understand that with our desires, through them, new forms of relationships are established, as well as new forms of love and new forms of creation” (Foucault, 1554).
- 10 Bert’s and J.R.’s last conversation is a real bedtime story and, as such, it also bids farewell to Bert, whose frequent cough indicates the beginning of his decline. Stage directions underscore the fantastic effect with a change in lighting and appropriate music. At first,
- J.R. puts his phone receiver down and stands by his bed—without his crutches. During the rest of this sequence he talks directly to BERT, though BERT continues to talk only to his phone receiver; as he tells his story, J.R., ‘invisible’ to BERT, eventually moves into BERT’s area, and sits on BERT’s bed, like an adult telling a child a bedtime story. (110)
- 11 In the end,
- J.R. leans over BERT and kisses him; BERT still relates only to his telephone receiver [...] J.R. returns to his bed and picks up his telephone receiver; the lighting indicates a return to ‘real’ time and space. (113)
- 12 The idea for the spectral element (J.R.’s move inside Bert’s area) in this sequence came from Michael Kearns who first directed the play, and was widely deployed later in the *Dog Plays*. Especially in *Hold*—the last of the trilogy—the context is similar: the ghostly apparition of Lad (Dog’s partner, dead from AIDS-related infections) is a relief for Dog whose only current perspective is death. In addition, the kiss in *Jerker*, indicative of a certain benevolence that Robert Chesley ascribes to his characters, compensates for the lack of physical contact.⁷
- 13 One of these stage directions—“*like an adult telling a child a bedtime story*”—necessitates further analysis. It appears that the theatrical regression we have detected, going from roleplay back to recital, goes along with another regression, from the sexual to the non-sexual: sexual activity is reduced to fantasies and masturbation, reminiscent of adolescence—their roles as two brothers exploring each other’s body make for this case—then declines for the benefit of a certain comfort found in childhood. Nonetheless, it is not a question of suppressing desire but of re-placing it in a pre-AIDS era, that is the common denominator of all the encounters in *Jerker*; in short sexual activity is rendered possible only in relation to the past, functioning either as a means of supply (of sexual fantasies that Bert and J.R. share)⁸ or as a memory (the encounter Bert details, specifying that it took place in 1979). In J.R.’s story, desire does not dissolve, it is only transformed:
- [...] 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. (110)
- 14 In this passage, J.R. is the “adult”, the one who is “aware” of sex, although the story he tells Bert illustrates physical contact that is not (yet) sexual: in short, after a journey

inside the enchanted Forbidden Forest, he and Bert, princely brothers, enter a palace where they meet a man made out of music; all three sleep in the same bed, in each other's arms. This story is intended to show Bert affection before his sleep or rather his death, since from the point of view of dramatic structure, this would be their last conversation.

- 15 Despite the attempts at rewriting history without AIDS and despite the characters' exile into the Forbidden Forest, AIDS, much like Poe's Red Death in *The Masque of the Red Death*, has already infiltrated the play's horizon. The recorded message on Bert's answering machine that J.R. hears in each of the subsequent calls contains an excerpt from *Do It Again*, a Judy Garland song that ends with these lines:

So as long as you've begun it,
And you know you shouldn't have done it...
Oh, do it again— (115-118)

- 16 John M. Clum observes that: "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). It is inferred that when Bert found out that the grim reality of AIDS had caught up with him, he changed the message on his answering machine (the old one, heard during the third and fourth calls, was a standard message) to echo his earlier-cited line: "*I don't regret a single moment of it*" (99). After all, it seems that sexuality as an identity trait, in this case, could only lead to death.
- 17 Even though plays of this period examine different strategies for gay men to protect themselves and others, as well as a wide range of reactions to safer sex practices, temporal sexual distancing is a constant at least until the advent of a new subjectivity induced by queer theory; the "canon" of plays advocating identity politics and considering gay men as an identity-specified community, like *The Normal Heart* and Terrence McNally's *Andre's Mother* (1988), seems overcome by Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Doug Holsclaw's *The Baddest of Boys* (1992). These plays reconnect with 1970s aesthetics—like drag and camp—that were abruptly suspended by the AIDS epidemic. Until then, sex in AIDS plays is primarily a matter of memory, imagination and words, rather than bodies. Enacting sex only as a past activity makes *Jerker* a memory play, like other AIDS plays of the period (especially *As Is*). In reciting their lines rather than enacting them against a non-specific set devoid of color (Bumbalo 216), Victor Bumbalo's anonymous characters in *Tell* (1993) render them universal. It is not clear whether the Visitor narrating his encounter with a young man is following a scenario, past remembrances or recalling a recent event, but the Man (PWA) he is paying a visit to at the hospital—the addressee of these recurring stories—very often interjects with "I remember".

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NOTES

1. In his 1987 play *Laughing Wild*, Christopher Durang parodies the "4H" theory—i.e. that AIDS exclusively affected homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs and Haitians—in a dialogue between God and archangel Gabriel (Durang 398 et seq.).
2. Hence Charles Ludlam's *Camille* (1973), based on *La Dame aux camélias*, has often been represented as an allegory of AIDS.
3. An alternative to "AIDS patient" that avoids stigmatising those who effectively had AIDS, especially those who had it but were not suffering from any (visible) AIDS-related infections.
4. *As Is* (1984), *The Normal Heart* (1985) and *Angels in America* (1991/1992), to name only a few.
5. One of Jesse Helms's famous quotes — "The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected" — was used by the Gran Fury collective in their famous 1987 installation *Let the Record Show* (Crimp 8).

6. Bert's last line is very similar to an excerpt from the Pomo Afro Homos' *Dark Fruit* (Pomo Afro Homos 343):

No, I regret nothing
Of the gay life I've led and
There's no way in Heaven or Hell
I'll let anyone make me.

7. A certain incoherence in the plot, however, raises a few questions: Bert and J.R. behave as if phone sex is their last resort but they still visit bars and have even seen each other since the beginning of their telephone calls, according to J.R. (105). During another call, Bert hangs up expeditiously because another man is sleeping next to him (101). This undermines the plot because one might wonder what, other than AIDS, prevents the characters from meeting, even though the particularly moving finale diverts the spectator's attention.

8. Bert and J.R. are not the only ones though; according to J.R. (100): "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".

ABSTRACTS

Inspired by recent analogies drawn between the Covid-19 pandemic and the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, this essay addresses the ways in which AIDS plays attest to a "sexual distancing", in particular with reference to Robert Chesley's *Jerker or the Helping Hand*. Even though other plays also explore exclusion and stigmatisation, *Jerker* tackles not only physical sexual distancing but also the displacement of the sexual into the past. Indeed, both characters in *Jerker* resort systematically to their memory not only to feed their masturbatory fantasies but also to recount, through a process of regression, their homosexual desire down to its most primitive form. Inasmuch as sex acts in it refer exclusively to the past, *Jerker* (1986) advances a new paradigm that AIDS plays would follow for several years.

Inspiré du parallèle, souvent dressé de nos jours, entre la pandémie de Covid-19 et le sida, cet essai propose une lecture de *Jerker or the Helping Hand* de Robert Chesley, pour explorer la « distanciation sexuelle » parmi les hommes homosexuels, tels que dépeints dans les pièces américaines du milieu des années 1980. Le paramètre qu'introduit le théâtre, au-delà de la distanciation sexuelle physique, est le déplacement du sexuel dans le passé. En effet, dans *Jerker*, les deux personnages recourent systématiquement à la mémoire pour alimenter leurs fantasmes masturbatoires mais aussi pour retracer, dans un processus de régression, le désir homosexuel jusqu'à sa forme la plus primitive. Dans la mesure où le sexe y est une activité qui se reporte exclusivement au passé, *Jerker* (1986) propose un nouveau paradigme que les pièces sur le sida suivront pendant plusieurs années.

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