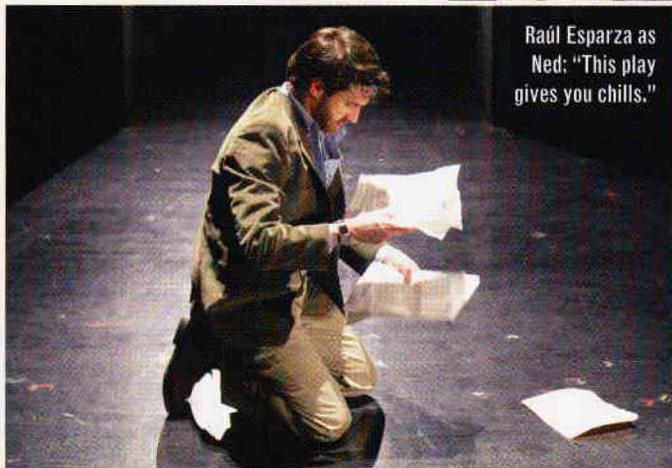
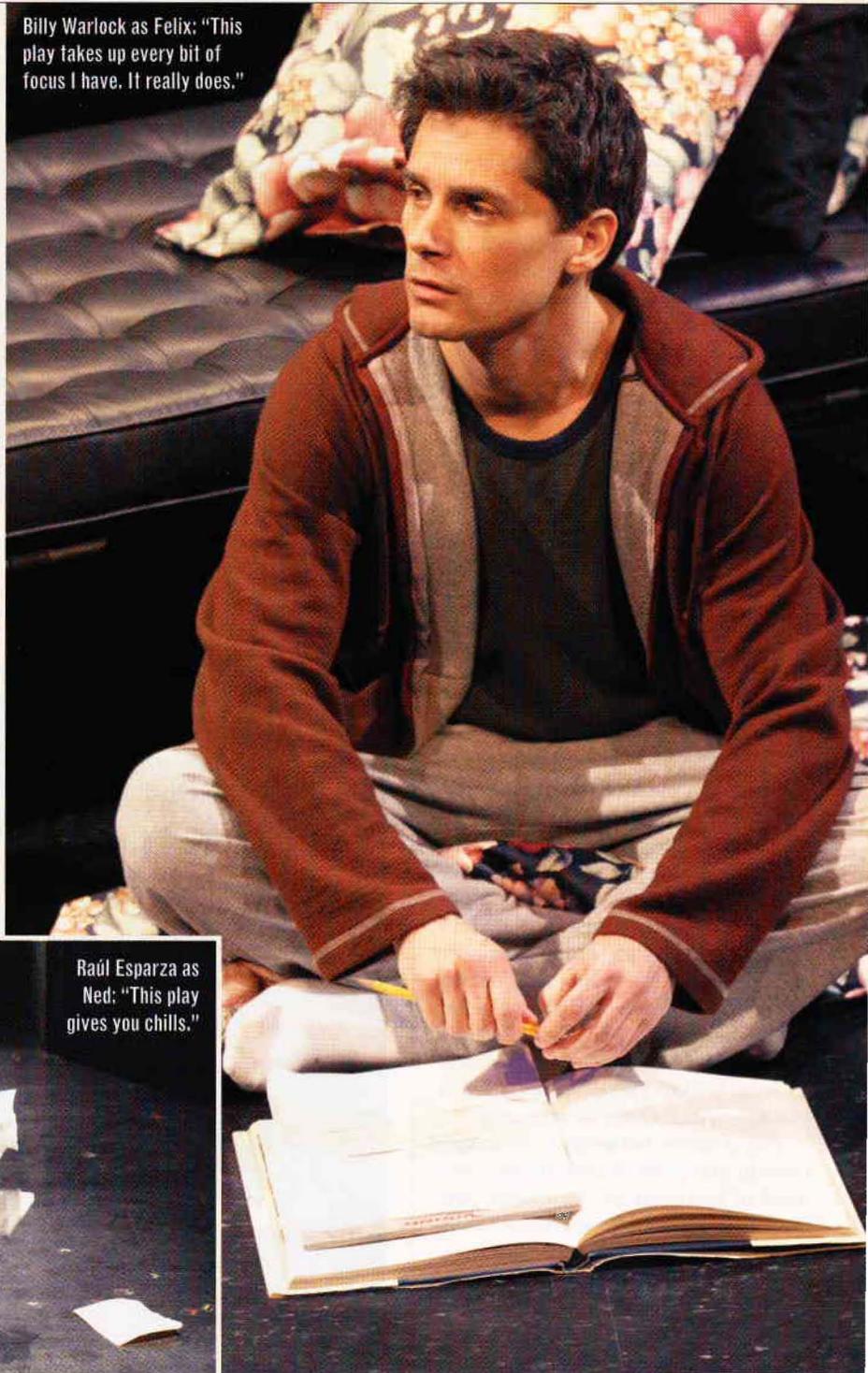


t h e a t e r

# Heart still burns

Larry Kramer's classic AIDS play *The Normal Heart*, revived in New York 20 years to the day after its opening, still cuts deep. A talk with leading men Raúl Esparza and Billy Warlock  
**By Michael Giltz**

Billy Warlock as Felix: "This play takes up every bit of focus I have. It really does."



Raúl Esparza as Ned: "This play gives you chills."

**I**s *The Normal Heart*—Larry Kramer's drama ripped from the headlines (or, more accurately, ripped from what should have been the headlines)—dated? All great plays are universal, but is *The Normal Heart* now a period piece?

We'll have to wait another 50 or 100 years before that question can be answered because the current revival at the Public Theater in New York City—

opening on April 21, 20 years to the day and in the very same space where it debuted—makes abundantly clear that *The Normal Heart* is still painfully relevant.

The AIDS crisis growing ever more deadly? A complacent public and a downright antagonistic government? Gay marriage and a passionate debate over whether gay identity is wrapped up in sex or something more? Younger

theatergoers might be forgiven for thinking Kramer wrote this play today, except for one thing: Its passion is still singular and rare.

"When I read it, it made me very angry. It still has that visceral wallop," says Raúl Esparza, who plays Kramer's stand-in, Ned Weeks, and who has also shone in such Broadway shows as *Taboo*, *Cabaret*, and *Tick, Tick... Boom!*



"When we did the first reading in this space I couldn't stop crying," says Esparza. "It gives you chills. There are so many things the audience will pick up that the characters don't realize. It is heavy with dramatic irony right now, every time you mention gay marriage. He keeps saying, 'Why didn't you fight for this?'"

For Billy Warlock—of *Baywatch* and *General Hospital* fame—the role of Ned's lover, Felix, is a chance to fight for broader opportunities as an actor.

"I'm a really simple guy," says Warlock, who walked away from *General Hospital* without any roles locked in. Eighteen days later he read for this play, left for New York, got an apartment, and started to prepare for his New York theatrical debut.

"This play takes up every bit of focus I have," Warlock says. "It really does. When I really stop and think about what we're getting ready to do, it's an overwhelming thing for a guy that's used to film and TV. This is a whole other animal."

Warlock is perhaps an instinctual actor, while Esparza is a very verbal and intellectual one. (He's so well-versed on gay issues that Esparza deserves to be an honorary homo, though he has been married to a woman since 1994.) But both he and Warlock describe Kramer as an intimidating presence.

"He's intense," laughs Warlock. "When he looks and talks to you...it's weight. He's the last guy I would ever want to piss off."

Esparza agrees.

"He's a very difficult man," says Esparza admiringly. "He pushes you. I've really fallen for him, I have to tell you. His integrity is extraordinary. I don't think anybody could live that burningly honest all the time. I've been asked by great people that I admire, 'How many men do you know that have changed the world?' And he's one of them." ■

For David Drake's commentary about *The Normal Heart*, turn to page 68.