

LETTERS LINGER

*“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Two Mothers. Two Sons. AIDS. Ten Years of American History.

On World AIDS Day 2020, December 1, Horizon Theatre at Home premiered a remarkable new play by actor/writer Clarinda Ross, *Love, M.* To my regret, I've been delaying watching the On-Demand recording of the play until now, a week before it disappears from YouTube. But just two days ago, I wrote a review of the Alliance's *A Very Terry Christmas*, which was more of a love letter to Terry Burrell than a review. Since Ms. Burrell plays one of the mothers in *Love, M.*, I was finally motivated to watch.

Written and performed as a series of letters (and phone calls) between Mothers and Sons, it is especially effective in a “socially isolated” video format and I found it to be a powerful and effective piece from start to finish.

We start in the mid-1980's. Deborah (played by playwright Clarinda Ross) is a doting mother whose son, Chris, (Chris Hecke) is in an MFA acting program in San Francisco. After a Thanksgiving visit to see his show, she and her husband learn the truth – Chris is gay and has fully embraced San Francisco “gay culture”. Deborah does not approve, and things escalate when Chris quits school to work for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt foundation. At the same time, Myrtle (Ms. Burrell) is a devout Southern Baptist, and her letters to her son Timothy (Lamman Rucker from TV's *Greenleaf*), an Atlanta lawyer, are filled with echoes of fire and brimstone and Bible verses condemning his “choice” to be gay. It matters not that Timothy and his partner are in a devoted monogamous relationship, and that his job takes him to the middle east as a peacemaker among divergent faiths and cultures. Yes, she is proud of the attention the hometown paper gives Timothy and dutifully saves all the clippings, but she coldly condemns him and his partner.

Both mothers are devoted to their sons, but neither can make that love unconditional, neither can fully accept their sons' homosexuality. Throughout the next ten years, the letters keep coming, but they are too often ignored. One mother is widowed, the other divorced. One of the sons gets AIDS, the other works with AIDS victims. Both mothers eventually take that final step to acceptance, but, in both cases, it's too little too late. The stories even begin to mingle, as Deborah eventually becomes a hospice volunteer (and friend to Timothy).

There are so many moments of genuine love coming through the letters, even in the midst of recrimination and judgmentalism. Chris and his mother always sign off with “XXX Three Kisses” even when they are farthest apart. There are also many moments that go right to your emotional core – Chris dying alone in a city his mother refuses to visit, Myrtle reprimanding her

preacher for his “gospel of hate,” Deborah reading her final letter to be included in Chris’s quilt panel (which, of course, ends with “XXX, Love, M.”). These are balanced with moments of sheer joy – Chris giddy with excitement at his acting career, Myrtle bonding with Timothy’s partner over cooking, Deborah succeeding in finding donors for an AIDS care facility.

These four characters are written and performed with boundless empathy and respect, and their stories and letters reveal a full range of aspects: pettiness, self-righteousness, quick anger, regret, atonement. In essence, they all show a bottomless depth of humanity. These are four characters I was thrilled to meet, whose stories moved me in ways I was not expecting.

The performances are spot on, as is the direction by Heidi Cline McKerley, and the design and editing by Amy L. Levin. We see not only the “sender” reading each letter, but the recipient reacting to the words as they are spoken. It’s a concept that makes this so much more interesting to watch than a simple “talking heads” Zoom Play, a concept that lets the actors show the depths of their ability to express subtext, to have their faces show the honest response that their words tend to hide.

As the post-show discussion made clear, there is still a lot of stigma attached to AIDS. One statistic cited was that perhaps half of all Black victims of AIDS are undiagnosed, as the stigma discourages so many from being tested. The fact that an HIV diagnosis is no longer a death sentence does nothing to change hearts and minds cast in stone. And though we have come a long way since the 1980’s in acceptance of alternative lifestyles, many parents still cannot, will not accept their sons and their daughters “as they are.”

Hopefully, this play will start conversations that may, in time, lead to that acceptance.

Seeing this play at the end of the year is a nice 2020 “bookend” to the January production at Out of Box Theatre of Gina Femia’s *We Are a Masterpiece*, another play set at the dawn of the AIDS pandemic. Both plays are powerful indictments of misinformation and prejudice, of religious justification for hate. Both are fervent pleas to find the humanity in the “other.”

And, as a fan of epistolary literature, I really appreciate Ms. Ross’s apparent joy in letter writing. *Love M.* is not only a moving meditation on AIDS and mothers and sons, it is if you’ll forgive me, a theatrical love letter to the art of letter-writing.

*“More than kisses, letters mingle souls.” -- John Donne*

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This production was co-sponsored by several organizations working with AIDS patients and offering free testing and care. For more information and to donate, please go to their websites:

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF)  
<https://www.aidshealth.org/>

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) is a global nonprofit organization providing cutting edge medicine and advocacy to over 1.5 million people in 43 countries. They are currently the largest provider of HIV/AIDS medical care in the U.S.

Black Leadership AIDS Crisis Coalition (BLACC)  
<https://blacc.net/>

Black Leadership AIDS Crisis Coalition (BLACC), formerly known as the AHF Black AIDS Crisis Taskforce, is an initiative of AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) developed to create a coalition of African-American cultural influencers and health advocates who will promote sexual health and revolutionize outreach to the African-American community on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. For more information visit: [aidshealth.org/affinity](https://aidshealth.org/affinity)

National AIDS Memorial Quilt <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt>

ABOUT THE NATIONAL AIDS MEMORIAL  
HEALING, HOPE, REMEMBRANCE, AND HISTORY  
ABOUT THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA

By sharing the story of the struggle against HIV/AIDS, we remember, in perpetuity, the lives lost, we offer healing and hope to survivors, and we inspire new generations of activists in the fight against stigma, denial, and hate, for a just future.