HIV/AIDS theatre after *Angels in America*: How neoliberalism stifled the genre’s counterhegemonic origins

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, playwrights have been using the stage to process, engage with, and negotiate its political and cultural effects. In the early years of the crisis, particularly in the US, HIV/AIDS plays homed in on the ways in which neoliberal governance stigmatised and oppressed those affected by the virus, a reaction largely attributable to its association with gay men and intravenous drug users. In some ways, the auditorium offered a place of solace for those witnessing death and pain, many of whom were queer or marginalised, as well as a platform on which to disseminate political ideas and galvanise audience members to fight wilful governmental inaction.

The political and biomedical developments that have taken place since then have been seismic, with HIV now treatable as a chronic illness and the burgeoning neoliberalism of the 1980s having secured ever more robust hegemony as the new millennium has worn on. In turn, the HIV/AIDS genre has continued to evolve. In certain respects, it has retained its queer roots, with many twenty-first-century plays continuing to scrutinise how such marginalised groups are detrimentally affected by the virus despite the introduction of new treatments. At the same time, however, the genre has (somewhat inevitably) been affected by the marketisation of theatre under neoliberalism. To varying degrees, theatres’ impetus to sell tickets and imagine their spectators primarily as consumers has stifled the counterhegemonic spirit found in earlier work.

Somewhat paradoxically, such political suppression has caused the genre’s popularity to wane. Despite a glut of recent HIV/AIDS plays such as Matthew Lopez’s The Inheritance having enjoyed mainstream success, Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, premiered in 1991, appears to hang on to an unofficial role as the most critically acclaimed and intellectually rich example of the genre. In part, this can be explained by its frequently cited relevance to today’s political landscape, with reviewers of Marianne Elliott’s 2017 production of Angels at London’s National Theatre drawing strong comparisons between the Reaganist political landscape Kushner depicts and the socio-political volatility of today’s world. However, this thesis complicates such a reading, arguing that the ongoing attachment to Angels is also related to its uniquely galvanising and politically hopeful dramaturgy, drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin to Bertolt Brecht to come up with a politics intent on improving the lives of the queer, the HIV-positive and the marginalised in a way that resonates with audiences to this day.

To support this line of enquiry, a significant portion of this study is spent tracking how neoliberalism has continued to shape the genre’s dramaturgies from the première of Angels in the early 1990s until the present day. The theoretical framework on which my analysis hangs is cultural materialist in nature, used to compare several HIV/AIDS plays produced across some of the world’s most neoliberal nations including Australia, the UK, and the US.

I focus on their potential as tools for anti-neoliberal intervention and queer liberation, as well as the extent to which the increased marketisation of theatre as an institution has hindered the production of counterhegemonic dramaturgies. I am particularly interested in uncovering the extent to which the plays I have chosen to examine established themselves as either mainstream or countercultural and, by extension, the extent to which this has helped them gain political traction. In establishing a kind of materialist genealogy of HIV/AIDS theatre, splitting up the genre into three distinct generations, this study elucidates some of the ways in which neoliberalism has indelibly affected such a popular genre, as well as analysing the wider implications for queer theatre more generally and the potential for the production of counterhegemonic work in future.
Declaration

I confirm that that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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About the Author

Louisa Hann obtained a BA in English and Related Literature from the University of York in 2014, as well as an MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature from the same institution the following year. After a couple of years away from academia, she commenced doctoral research at the University of Manchester in September 2017. Over the course of her programme, she has presented research at a number of conferences and co-organised the HIV Humanities Conference, an event that also marked the establishment of an HIV Humanities research network at the University of Manchester. Beyond her doctoral research, she has also undertaken two terms of teaching work and had a paper published on Matthew Lopez’s recent play *The Inheritance* in *English: Journal of the English Association*. 
Introduction: Reading HIV/AIDS plays in the neoliberal twenty-first century

On 4 May 2017, a much-anticipated run of Tony Kushner’s two-part play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, directed by Marianne Elliott, opened at London’s National Theatre. Scheduled to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the first performance of *Part 2: Perestroika* in 1992 at Los Angeles’ Mark Taper Forum (closely followed by the play’s full UK première at the National Theatre in 1993) the timely revival generated huge swathes of press attention. In part, this could be attributed to its firm consecration as a modern American classic. As David Savran noted in a recent oral history of the play, following its Broadway debut at the Walter Kerr Theatre in 1993,

> So many people – theatre professionals, all across the line, critics, academics, the general public – immediately recognized that this was a canonical text. It became an instant classic. That’s the kind of thing that almost never happens. It’s a popular success. It wins all of the big prizes. (qtd. in Butler and Kois 190)

Indeed, as well as taking the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993, some of the most high-profile productions of *Angels* have won scores of prestigious honours including Tony Awards, Drama Desk Awards and, most recently, a Laurence Olivier Award. Furthermore, unlike antecedent HIV/AIDS plays such as Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1985) or William Hoffman’s *As Is* (1985), which focused primarily on the lives of gay couples affected by the virus, Kushner painted a picture of the epidemic that transcended the experiences of its central protagonists, the infected Prior and his partner Louis. With a combined run-time approaching eight hours, both parts of *Angels*
use the central theme of disease to explore not only the impact of HIV/AIDS on its victims’ lives, but themes affecting the wider US political arena of the time. The complex interrelations between Reaganomics, global warming, the so-called ‘culture wars’, America’s religious landscape, and the enduring legacy of McCarthyism, for example, are all woven into Angels’ plot, prompting audience members to consider not only how AIDS wreaks havoc on the lives of its central couple, but also the ways in which the political context of 1980s America compounds both their pain and the wider effects of the epidemic.

Despite Angels’ obvious divergence from the HIV/AIDS plays that came before it, many reviewers of Elliott’s production were struck by the ways in which the complex fabric of Angels has facilitated its canonisation as a defining play of the genre and, even, twentieth-century American theatre more broadly. One LA Times critic lauded it as ‘the most intelligent, provocative and affecting drama of my lifetime’ (McNulty, ‘London Calling’), whilst Esquire magazine dubbed it ‘the hottest theatre ticket in Britain this year’ (Fellows), acclaim no doubt also driven by the production’s star-studded cast, which included the likes of Nathan Lane, Andrew Garfield and Denise Gough. Beyond the production’s obvious cultural weight and stylistic verve, however, critics were keen to reflect on the enduring legacy of Kushner’s play as a historical document, particularly considering how attitudes towards its central theme – the HIV epidemic – have changed since the early 1990s. In the Guardian, for example, it was noted that ‘Prejudice and homophobia still exist but, watching the first play, one is reminded how much has changed since it was written in terms of gay rights, sexual openness and HIV-testing’ (Billington), whilst a reviewer for The Stage explained that ‘Where once it might have been a radical statement, Angels in America now plays like a raw, truthful documentary of where we’ve come from, and serves as
a necessary reminder of those bleak times before AIDS became a treatable disease’ (Shenton, ‘Angels in America Review’). Staged at a time when antiretroviral therapies had the potential to increase an HIV-positive person’s life expectancy to ‘near normal’ (Roxby), Elliott’s acclaimed production of Angels exemplified the pedagogical potential of reviving decades-old HIV/AIDS plays for contemporary audiences, reminding younger generations of the particular horrors many of their forebears experienced towards the end of the twentieth century.

At the same time, however, an overwhelming majority of critics also highlighted the stark contemporaneity of Angels, pointing out that the play’s political landscape was eerily resonant of a present characterised by Trumpian politics and runaway neoliberal capitalism. One, for example, emphasised Kushner’s ability to tackle

the shocking tardiness of the Reagan administration to respond to this crisis. And in some ways it is the political terrain of the play that hits most forcefully today. A scene in which Justice Department officials celebrate “the end of liberalism” has a chilling resonance, not least when you learn that Roy Cohn, the vicious, hypocritical lawyer who represents that mind-set here (and who denied his own sexuality and his affliction with Aids) was Trump’s legal adviser for years. The portrait of a fractured America feels no less resonant today. (Hemming)

Ronald Reagan’s well-documented inaction surrounding HIV/AIDS during the early years of the epidemic is indeed ideologically redolent of current US President Donald Trump’s repeal of the country’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Just as the Reagan administration exploited the welfare-averse and highly privatised structure of the US healthcare system to victimise and oppress the HIV-positive by failing to effectively tackle the virus, Trump’s attempts to repeal the ACA reveal tacit
plans to strip away LGBT rights through the logic of neoliberal marketisation. As Sean Cahill notes, in the years running up to 2016, the ACA had ‘been extremely helpful for low-income LGBT people and PLWH [people living with HIV] who previously could not qualify for Medicaid because they did not have dependent children or a disability, or because they were not poor enough’ (21). Thus, both presidents betray a desire to compound the marginalisation of already-stigmatised groups through a rhetoric of neoliberal ‘common sense’ that rewards the rich with tax relief whilst punishing poor and stigmatised minority constituencies with welfare cuts. Oskar Eustis, director and dramaturg who commissioned Angels’ première at the Mark Taper Forum, has even gone so far as to figure Kushner as a kind of soothsayer for neoliberalism’s continued hold over the US, noting that

When Tony wrote Roy Cohn, he was a larger-than-life, demonic figure. Now his pupil is president of the United States. My God. Talk about the return of the repressed! Here he is, in all his glory. Trump’s America is Roy Cohn’s America: sharply divided between winners and losers, hatred of the powerless used as a cynical tool to enrich the privileged. Thus proving, as Mark Harris says, that Tony’s drag name should be Eera Lee Prescient. (qtd. in Butler and Kois 408-9)

Undoubtedly, the ruthlessly Hobbesian spirit of Cohn is recapitulated unashamedly by Trump and his administration. The Reaganist era that Cohn helped to orchestrate, characterised by remorseless privatisation and the dismantling of welfare provisions for many Americans, sparked a neoliberal project that continues to this day.

The inclinations of aforementioned critics to marvel at the medical breakthroughs made since the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, then, serve to gloss over the ways in which the virus continues to impact (and imperil) lives across the globe. Although
effective treatments or preventative tools may exist, their accessibility is often
dependent on a person’s location, nationality, race, or personal finances, disparities
that are bound up with the inequalities produced by neoliberal hegemony, particularly
in the US. As will be explored at length throughout this study, the neoliberal logic that
facilitated the Reagan administration’s paltry response to the initial outbreak of
HIV/AIDS can still be detected within contemporary governmental and corporate
responses to the ongoing epidemic, albeit in new forms and articulations. HIV-positive
people continue to face stigmatisation, marginalisation and exploitation by
governmental bodies, Big Pharma, and wider society. As I will address in later chapters,
contemporary free-market ideologies indelibly affect how people living with
HIV/AIDS are able to access drugs, exist in online spaces (particularly dating and
hook-up apps), engage in sexual practices, connect with older/younger people living
with the virus, and, indeed, tell their stories onstage. More than just a virus whose
attendant stigma and contentious politics expose the ways in which certain forms of
governance oppress and marginalise specific groups, however, HIV also operates as a
metaphor for wider cultural and political anxieties. As noted by Ben Power, who was
deputy artistic director of the National Theatre at the time of Angels’ revival,

It feels like the disease becomes metaphorical now for other kinds
of threat and uncertainty, external and internal. Threats that we can
recognize. Certainly in this country, since the [financial] crash,
there’s been this feeling of instability rather than stability in our
political and social institutions. That sense of a shuddering, a
juddering, which is manifest in the disease in the play. (qtd. in
Butler and Kois 361)

It is in this way, I argue, that the restaging of the play in 2017 represented a junctural
moment in the history of HIV/AIDS theatre as a genre. As well as celebrating the 25th
anniversary of Kushner’s *magnum opus*, the production’s political contemporaneity reminded audiences that people living with the virus, as well as marginalised groups more broadly, continue to be negatively affected in myriad ways by neoliberal forms of governance.

Despite its clear exposition of the marginalising effects of Reaganomics, however, *Angels* cannot be described as a straightforwardly anti-capitalist play. From one perspective, its subcultural credentials are clear, with early productions having drawn protests from evangelical preachers and its treatment of Roy Cohn, ‘the polestar of human evil’, representing a clear attack on contemporary neoliberal governance (Kushner 229). However, to classify the play as subcultural would be an act of oversimplification, as many productions of *Angels* have been inflected with a stark commercialism that contravenes the playtext’s ideological undercurrents and places it well within what might be thought of as the theatrical mainstream (an admittedly thorny notion that will be addressed shortly). Elliott’s production is exemplary of such mainstreaming by dint of, amongst other things, its robust marketing campaign, which widely advertised the play well before its première and capitalised on its celebrity cast, as well as the keenly advertised launch of *Angels*-emblazoned merchandise that appeared in the National Theatre Bookshop (The Arts Shelf). These factors surely influenced the (almost unerringly positive) reception of the play and the scope and number of audience members it attracted, evidenced by the readiness with which it was labelled ‘the National Theatre’s most anticipated show of the year’ by many reviewers (Taylor).

To further examine how the material conditions of theatrical work addressing such a politically loaded subject as HIV/AIDS can affect its reception, therefore, this project
will ground itself in cultural materialist theory, a scholarly framework that seeks to understand how given cultural products or phenomena play a reciprocal role in shaping or maintaining ideological positions or power structures. The chapters that follow will draw on the work of a number of cultural materialist thinkers, most notably the late scholar Raymond Williams, who asserted that cultural materialism facilitated forms of Marxist analysis that diverged from Marxism’s more orthodox articulations, casting a sceptical eye over arguments that supported, for example, the widely cited base-superstructure model, which he saw as susceptible to reductionist readings. Via revaluations of concepts such as the base, which he argued should be viewed not as a fixed economic abstraction but as a description of dynamic processes involving specific social and economic activities, Williams claimed to arrive at cultural materialism as

a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of “arts”, as social uses of material means of production (from language as material “practical consciousness” to the specific technologies of writing and forms of writing, through to mechanical and electronic communications systems).

(‘Notes on Marxism’ 243)

In this way, he was keen to emphasise the contribution of culture (broadly conceived) to the productive processes that shape society and, by extension, maintain or challenge dominant value systems and manifestations of power. Cultural products such as plays and novels (to pick forms with which Williams often engaged) do not merely represent the secondary effects of determining productive forces but are themselves active

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1 This idea separates the relations of production (the base) into a separate sphere from society’s cultural forms, political ideas and institutions (the superstructure), positing that the base primarily influences the formation of the superstructure. It has been heavily critiqued as a flawed metaphor that fails to account for the complex imbrications of such forces.
elements in the construction of social realities. A significant theoretical influence on the development of such cultural materialist notions was the work of Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci, especially his refinement of a theory of hegemony. As will be explicated in greater detail later in this introduction, this study uses a theoretical framework grounded in cultural materialism and always alert to Gramsci’s idea that hegemony comprises those forms of power which seek to manipulate the beliefs, perceptions, and values of a given society – its ‘common sense’ – in order to preserve the dominance of a given ideology. More specifically, I will use this framework to demonstrate how neoliberalism as a hegemonic project has informed the writing and production of HIV/AIDS plays since the première of Angels in its entirety in 1992 through to the present day.

In terms of this study’s scope, the works I focus on overwhelmingly address the HIV/AIDS epidemic as experienced by gay and queer-identified individuals in the West, and were all written, produced and staged in Western countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, the UK, and the US. This limited focus is related to my interest in neoliberalism and its material relationship to theatre as an institution. Whilst the tentacles of free market fundamentalism have infiltrated almost every corner of the globe, the kind of neoliberal hegemony railed against in Angels and, indeed, some of the subsequent HIV/AIDS plays I will analyse, is very much a Western project by origin. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the examples of HIV/AIDS theatre that most explicitly engage with, and are most profoundly affected by, neoliberalism are those in Western localities, particularly the US. A corollary of this is that the plays I address centre primarily around queer lives. Historically, of course, HIV/AIDS has disproportionately affected gay and bisexual men in the West compared to other members of its population, with much of the activism, art and
popular discourse surrounding the virus initiated by and focused on queer constituencies. In the US, for example, 67% of all new HIV infections are recorded in men who have sex with men (MSM), despite their reportedly representing only 4% of the country’s population (Avert). As Kushner’s play emphasises, stigmatisation surrounding the HIV virus has historically been linked to its high prevalence in the MSM population and been compounded by neoliberal forms of governance. It is for this reason that my study is interested in unveiling how neoliberalism, stigmatisation, and anti-normative politics intersect within a specifically queer, Western HIV/AIDS genre of theatre. The following chapters tackle questions such as the extent to which both subcultural and mainstream forms of commercial theatre counter or support hegemonic processes and how far theatre involved in the neoliberal market is able to present counterhegemonic forms of political commentary, protest, or activism.

My approach is also loosely chronological, starting with works that appeared in the final few years leading up to the millennium, and finishing with analysis of recent plays such as Matthew Lopez’s critically acclaimed *The Inheritance* (2018), which mirrors the structure of *Angels*, responds to some of its themes and, with varying degrees of success, attempts to update the politics of the HIV/AIDS genre to suit a disorientating socio-political landscape characterised by Trumpism and increasingly divisive forms of populism. Such an approach will help to track how the HIV/AIDS genre has adapted, resisted or been shaped by the neoliberal hegemony that has spread throughout the world, as well as the ways in which neoliberalism itself has altered. It is important to remember that neoliberalism is not a static phenomenon, so a secondary aim of this study is to examine how it has altered since the 1990s. Chapter Five in particular is interested in how the genre’s playwrights have negotiated a political landscape characterised by a more reactionary neoliberalism which, as political
philosopher Nancy Fraser points out, often colludes with forms of neoconservatism that feed isolationist and even jingoistic impulses.

**Examining the composite nature of HIV/AIDS theatre scholarship**

Before further explicating the cultural materialist framework on which this analysis rests, I will briefly sketch out the scholarly field into which it stakes a claim and, therefore, the merits of such an approach. The body of work addressing the genre of HIV/AIDS theatre is so polyvalent and wide-ranging that attempting to offer a list or overview of its central texts would be both reductive and unsatisfactorily fragmentary. One would not be overgeneralising, however, to demarcate two recent scholarly works as germane illustrations of popular debates affecting the field: Jacob Juntunen’s *Mainstream AIDS Theatre, the Media, and Gay Civil Rights: Making the Radical Palatable* (2016) and Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt’s edited volume of essays, *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (2018). Juntunen’s monograph responds to the many performance scholars who have identified and critiqued conservative impulses within mainstream US-based HIV/AIDS plays, particularly regarding their complicity with consumer capitalism. He positions the volume as a corrective to works such as David Román’s *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (1998), an influential monograph within HIV/AIDS performance scholarship that takes aim at the ‘commodification of performance and performance art’ and the loss of ‘its capacity to engage in radical critique once it enters more mainstream venues and mass-cultural spectatorships’ (Román, *Acts of Intervention* 121), as well as David Savran’s essay ‘Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the
Nation’, which dares to critique what Savran perceives as the play’s political ambivalence and apologism surrounding certain aspects of Reaganist, neoliberal governance. Accusing such scholars of employing ideology in a ‘particularly pessimistic Marxist fashion,’ Juntunen claims that what he demarcates as ‘mainstream’ HIV/AIDS plays such as Angels in America and The Normal Heart ‘simultaneously incorporate elements of an emergent ideology while reproducing enough of the dominant ideology to be palatable within the culture industry’, thus bolstering the acceptance of gay men within the ‘U.S. imagined community’ and alleviating some of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS (26).

A rigorous cultural materialist approach, however, can quickly render problematic such an optimistic embrace of the political potentialities of well-known HIV/AIDS plays. Applying concepts set out by cultural materialist Alan Sinfield to Juntunen’s chosen texts, for example, can serve to muddy the latter’s understanding of the mainstream versus the subcultural. As Sinfield explains,

The defining concepts for the exploration of the relations between mainstream and subculture are company, venue, constituency, and address. Company means the little theatre movement, the English Stage Company, Gay Sweatshop, alongside the great West End and Broadway producers. Venue means not just the place of the performance, but the entire significance – where it is, how you get there, how much the tickets cost and how you buy them; and what it’s like inside – the foyer space, the auditorium, the stage. (342)

‘Constituency’, meanwhile, refers very simply to groups who feel at home in the venue, and ‘address’ refers to ‘whose knowledge, experience, beliefs and feelings are being appealed to, and, more important, being taken for granted’ (Sinfield 343). On one level, Juntunen successfully accounts for some of these concepts by examining Angels’ 1993
Broadway première, directed by George C. Wolfe, via a materialist lens. He places a particular emphasis on its Broadway venue, observing that ‘since the play was presented in two parts, with tickets set at $60 per installment, Angels sold out, indicating that spectators believed or hoped that the show was worth the high price’ (70) and that ‘in the plush, newly renovated theatre, Angels in America was geographically and spatially attached to prior canonical productions in the same space’ (72). Its obvious commercial potential, then, demonstrates that Angels is firmly grounded within the mainstream theatre industry. To use in-depth analysis of a single production of Angels to make the bold claim that it ‘created a space for gay men in the dominant ideology’s imagined community’ (Juntunen 66) is, however, to ignore the ways in which other productions of the play have historically grated against mainstream values. Indeed, it erroneously takes for granted the idea that a mainstream venue and marketing campaign guarantees mainstream forms of address under Sinfield’s rubric.

A comparison of a single scene in Declan Donnellan’s 1993 production of Angels and Elliott’s recent revival, both of which took place at the National Theatre, is enough to problematise Juntunen’s approach and demonstrate the function of a consistent materialist analysis. Archival photographs from Donnellan’s production depict Prior (Stephen Dillane) and Louis (Jason Isaacs) as naked or at least topless in bed together during the initial scenes of Millennium Approaches. Although Elliott’s production took place in the same theatrical institution as Donnellan’s at a time when attitudes towards homosexuality have (broadly speaking) liberalised, the couple in her production (played by Andrew Garfield and James McArdle) remain fully clothed during these scenes and throughout most of the play. As Martin Banham notes, nudity became ‘a convention of homosexual drama’ during the 1990s, ‘used both to shock a straight
audience and appeal to a gay one’ (809). Although audience members who attended the National Theatre’s 2017 production of *Angels* are unlikely to have been truly scandalised by exposed flesh during these scenes (Russell Tovey’s Joe provides a glimpse of nudity during a scene at the beach, after all), keeping Prior and Louis covered during their more intimate moments appears to ‘de-gay’ aspects of the play that may have appealed to queer audience members in its previous productions. Indeed, the semiotics of a bare torso become sexualised within the context of a couple’s bedroom, so keeping characters clothed in this way betrays an aversion to illuminating the sexual aspects of Prior and Louis’ relationship onstage and, by extension, a desire to distance the production somewhat from the realm of the ‘gay play’. That Donnellan’s earlier production could be read as ‘gayer’ than Elliott’s therefore (albeit in subtle ways) indicates *Angels’* unstable relationship with the realms of mainstream theatre. The ability for texts to traverse or trouble the subcultural/mainstream binary in this way reinforces Sinfield’s assertion that ‘most gay-themed mainstream plays have crossed over from the fringe’ (341) and complicates Juntunen’s categorisation of *Angels* as ‘thoroughly mainstream’ (66). Indeed, although aspects of Donnellan’s production could still convincingly be labelled as such, its reaching out to established subcultural traditions such as onstage nudity demonstrates a willingness to trouble the play’s mainstream credentials. As Emily Garside has pointed out, ‘given that [Donnellan’s production] was at the National – which, at that time, was quite conservative, older, middle-class, that’s quite a dynamic to drop this play into’ (qtd. in Butler and Kois 93). The possibility for scandal was palpable.

Unsatisfied with Juntunen’s impermeable use of the term ‘mainstream’ to analyse the public reception of various HIV/AIDS plays, then, my study exposes the ways in which mainstream/subcultural categories are constantly shaped and reshaped by
institutions and how these institutions themselves relate to wider hegemonic structures. The theatrical landscape does not, as Juntunen suggests, reflect easily discernible expressions of hegemonic culture versus counterhegemonic culture, an assumption that leads to an oversimple interpretation of the theatrical mainstream. By figuring the mainstream as synonymous with the US citizenry, his thesis fails to account for the ways in which the audience *Angels* addresses is shaped by socio-economic considerations. Going back to Elliott’s productions, for example, it is notable that the National Theatre promotes itself as a ‘world-class theatre that is entertaining, challenging and inspiring’ and made ‘for everyone’ (The National Theatre, ‘About the National Theatre’). Such claims about universality are, in part, backed up by its cheap ticket offerings to the young, students, and people on low incomes, as well as its efforts to increase accessibility through touring productions and National Theatre Live, a scheme in which productions are broadcast live to cinemas around the UK (The National Theatre, ‘Help Centre’; ‘National Theatre at Home’). That these efforts are partly subsidised by the Arts Council, a government-funded public body set up to improve access to the performing, visual and literary arts across the UK, demonstrates that there is at least a modicum of redistributive politicking ongoing within the arts industry.

Still, the National Theatre’s claims are undergirded by a neoliberal logic that undermines the institution’s approach to accessibility. By labelling its artistic output ‘challenging’ and ‘inspiring’, the theatre adheres to the notion that plays must ‘improve’ a person to be considered worthwhile. It feeds into an individualistic view of theatregoing as a means to work on *oneself* rather than to enjoy a communal experience, thereby demarcating the theatre as a place for the educated and aspirational. In more explicit terms, then, I argue that it tacitly appeals to the already-monied, a
suspicion corroborated by recent figures surrounding participation in the arts. As illustrated in a 2015 report by the Warwick Commission, for example, visitors to UK theatres continue to be overwhelmingly confined to wealthy socio-economic groups:

A new segmentation of cultural consumption [...] shows that the two most highly culturally engaged groups account for only 15% of the general population and tend to be of higher socio-economic status. The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment of all: between 2012 and 2015 they account (in the most conservative estimate possible) for at least 28% of live attendance to theatre, thus benefiting directly from an estimated £85 per head of Arts Council England funding to theatre. (The Warwick Commission 33)

Despite the National Theatre’s efforts to combat the fact that its attendees are disproportionately white, educated and wealthy, then, it is clear that much broader systemic changes across the arts sector and beyond would be required to render the very act of theatregoing ‘mainstream’ at the level of a broad citizenry.

In the US, the performing arts sector is similarly exclusionary, if not more so. According to aggregate data from a collection of annual surveys conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) between the years 1982 and 2012, the percentage of Americans in any given year who had attended a non-live stage play stood at an average of 11.5%, evidence again of low engagement levels with the performing arts amongst the general population (National Endowment for the Arts, Survey of Public Participation). The relative exclusivity of theatregoing is widely recognised as a product of its prohibitively expensive ticket prices and the fact that most popular productions appear only in major wealthy cities. This means, as one
Guardian journalist puts it, ‘that only certain categories of people can afford it and can attend it. Those people may talk to each other, particularly on social media, but this doesn’t translate into wider impact’ (Soloski). It is in this way that I figure Juntunen’s definition of ‘mainstream’ as reductive in its failure to account for the fact that the so-called ‘U.S. imagined community’ into which gay men are assimilated via *Angels* is likely to disproportionately comprise wealthy New Yorkers. In some ways, the absence of a coherent class-based analysis in Juntunen’s work is reflective of what Kate Crehan identifies as an increasing generalised aversion to Marxist notions of class within academic circles. Crehan writes that ‘[o]ne reason this approach to inequality has fallen into disfavor is that all too often nowadays the Marxist concept of class is understood as confined to the realm of the economic […] Understood in this reductive way, class is indeed easy to dismiss as overly simplistic’ (4). Instead, she advocates for a Gramscian view of class that takes into account both economic conditions and the various other ways in which structural inequality manifests and power is shaped, focusing in particular on Gramsci’s concepts of subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense. Ill-attuned to such complex articulations of class and therefore prone to dismissing it entirely, many HIV/AIDS performance scholars have chosen to analyse plays primarily through an identitarian lens, without paying adequate heed to the ways in which socio-economic factors (specifically related to the rise of neoliberalism) are inextricably linked to the oppression of certain identity groups. When Juntunen vaunts the high ticket prices associated with Wolfe’s *Angels* production as evidence of its liberatory potential for gay men, then, he overlooks the ways in which they exclude certain socio-economic groups from the auditorium and, by extension, serve to promote a limited notion of ‘acceptable’ gayness thoroughly confined to the moneyed classes.
In many ways, therefore, Juntunen’s work contrasts starkly with Campbell and Gindt’s aforementioned edited collection, *Viral Dramaturgies*, which opens up new discussions surrounding the glut of HIV/AIDS theatre created by Anglophone male artists that is typically revived and archived by the Western cultural establishment. Indeed, many of the collection’s authors examine the ways in which distinctly neoliberal ideologies have shaped this rather homogenous archive, as well as the ways in which contemporary artists are worrying at its boundaries. *Viral Dramaturgies* paints a picture of HIV/AIDS performance as ‘still a burgeoning, ever-shifting field’ that invites study ‘of the manifold ways in which performance reflects and addresses the social and political challenges presently posed by HIV and AIDS’ (Campbell and Gindt 5-6). To facilitate this emphasis on a wide range of constituencies affected by HIV/AIDS, the collection addresses work produced across diverse localities including South Africa, Papua New Guinea, Sweden, Puerto Rico, China, and Canada. In this way, it brings the abundant scholarship addressing Western HIV/AIDS theatre (focused, of course, overwhelmingly on white gay men) into conversation with a recent body of work exploring how community and applied forms of theatre are working to prevent the ongoing spread of the virus, much of which focuses on theatre producers in Africa. Examples include Ola Johansson’s *Community Theatre and AIDS* (2011) and Hazel Barnes’ *Applied Drama and Theatre as an Interdisciplinary Field in the Context of HIV/AIDS in Africa* (2014). By placing scholarship exploring the queer dimensions of much Western HIV/AIDS genre alongside that which addresses the epidemic in typically overlooked localities, Campbell and Gindt pay much-needed attention to the ways in which the genre of HIV/AIDS theatre has traditionally been considered the domain of the white, Western and middle class, a scholarly myopia many are keen to address. In a review of Juntunen’s monograph, for example, Kalle
Westerling detects in it ‘an incredibly hopeful, almost utopian sense of optimism and progress, written before the current US presidency [of Donald Trump. Juntunen’s] arguments about continual progress must overlook that the crisis of HIV/AIDS in both the United States and globally is still ongoing,’ not least due to failings of various neoliberal governments (128). Campbell and Gindt temper this utopian impulse by assembling a range of articles that explore a diverse range of experiences of HIV-positive people. As well as examining performance pieces and theatre projects drawn from a wide range of localities, the volume’s authors look beyond works addressing simply the lives of white, Western gay men to discuss those of women, sex workers, and Australian indigenous communities. In so doing, the pair is able to critically compare and contrast issues traditionally associated with the queer-identified with those of broader constituencies.

By consciously assembling their edited collection to account for the broad range of identity groups affected by HIV/AIDS, however, the authors featured in Viral Dramaturgies necessarily adopt a rather liberal definition of theatre and performance that includes activist marches, demonstrations, experimental dance pieces, and applied theatre alongside works intended for more traditional theatrical venues under its rubric. The generous breadth of this definition is borne of the fact that plays exploring the experiences of marginalised groups living with HIV/AIDS have not been popularised in the way that those of playwrights such as Kushner or Kramer have been; evidence, of course, of the ways in which profit-conscious theatre institutions view white, male experiences as more saleable. Whilst Campbell and Gindt’s all-encompassing approach lends itself well to interrogating the different ways in which the politics of identity has shaped the HIV/AIDS genre outside of the commercial auditorium, then, it does not sit well within a study such as mine that examines how theatre as a
marketised institution colludes with (or, indeed, pushes back against) neoliberal ideologies. Whilst certain modes of HIV/AIDS activism such as demonstrations and marches are certainly worthy objects of study within the realm of performance, they are not easily comparable to plays such as *Angels* when read through the lens of political economy as they require few material resources or commercial ties. By comparison, even subcultural forms of theatre that grate against mainstream values require performance spaces and platforms for publicity directly linked to private enterprise: establishing a relationship with theatre as an institution in this way necessitates a degree of negotiation with neoliberal hegemony.

Another way of clarifying the formal limits of the HIV/AIDS theatre I examine in this study is explicated in Michael Shane Boyle’s essay ‘Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy’ (2017). Noting a recent surge in scholarship exploring the labour of performance and how the theatre operates as a workplace, Boyle advocates a return to Marx’s vast body of work to illuminate the political and economic conditions of the contemporary stage. Boyle argues that many professedly Marxist examples of theatrical scholarship do not adequately distinguish between the ways in which capitalist society impacts theatre and theatre’s relationship to the capitalist mode of production. To understand how the work of performers is subsumed by capital, he claims, it is necessary to examine the social relations which undergird commercial theatre and give form to value within given auditoria. It is in this way that we can begin to untangle the differences between the theatre-based works examined in this study and some of those examined in Campbell and Gindt’s which have been performed in activist or pedagogical contexts. Although, as Boyle is keen to point out, the theatre was by no means a primary topic of interest for Marx, he did briefly examine the institution in order to re-evaluate Adam Smith’s
concept of productive labour in the posthumously published *Theories of Surplus Value* (sometimes referred to as the fourth volume of *Capital*). For Smith, actors always engage in so-called ‘unproductive labour’ as they involve direct social relations: the services produced by their labour are directly consumed by spectators and do not realise any form of saleable commodity. Marx, however, complicates this reading, implying that Smith ignores the possibility that there could exist an intermediary between the producer and consumer in the theatre: an entrepreneur who enlists an actor’s service not to enjoy it for themselves but to purchase temporary disposal of the actor’s labour-power, thereby establishing a social relation of capital to labour. The performance service is not consumed as a use value, therefore, but as a commodity to be sold to an audience. In this way, Boyle argues,

> When the return the capitalist receives on his initial investment exceeds the value of the labor power, the capital he advanced can be said to have been valorized. In such a case, however, the material situation Smith originally describes still holds; the service perishes “in the very instant” of performance, but not before it has transformed socially into the form of a capitalist commodity. Marx moves the actor’s performance that Smith describes as unproductive into a new set of social relations through which the very same labor yields surplus value. (12-13)

It is this identification of surplus value creation through productive labour that allows Marx to distinguish between theatre and performance. It is not necessary for labour to be productive to be considered performance, but labour must be productive for performance to be subsumed into the theatre:

> Performance pertains to a work performed, and theatre to a set of social relations that can encompass this work. To put it another way, theatre describes the social form performance takes under
capital. A theatre organized along capitalist lines need not be structured in an industrialized fashion as may have been found in Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre, but it must entail the social relations specific to the capitalist mode of production. For theatrical labor to be “productive” it will be organized as wage labor for the purposes of creating commodities that yield surplus value. (Boyle 13)

The productions this study examines all comprise the relevant social relations needed to be considered theatre under Marx’s (and Boyle’s) definition. Although some of the plays I examine have not been performed within traditional theatres or auditoria, instead taking place in cabaret performance venues or in temporary festival arenas, all have a production history that involves the commercial logic Marx explicates.

Hence, my study occupies ground somewhere in between *Viral Dramaturgies* and *Making the Radical Palatable*. Despite analysing only commercial theatre, my study shares commonalities with Campbell and Gindt’s collection in its anti-neoliberal framework, highlighting how the marginalising powers of free market fundamentalism have come to develop a genre of HIV/AIDS theatre that overwhelmingly ignores experiences outside those of white, privileged gay male communities. This does not mean, of course, that I necessarily address the lacuna the pair identify as afflicting HIV/AIDS scholarship: that is, the disregard for the community-based and activist-led performance pieces that explore the experiences of people living with HIV who are not gay men living in the Western world. Although many of the plays or performance works I examine were written and produced on shoestring budgets and in subcultural venues, their institutional ties fit within a nexus of commercially accessible theatre in a way that many of those addressed in *Viral Dramaturgies* do not.
I acknowledge that drawing such a distinction between the commercial and the non-commercial is bound to produce problematics and contestations given the diversity of ways in which theatre and performance works are produced, staged, funded and accessed today. As such, I invoke the commercialism of my chosen case studies as an expansive heuristic to emphasise their specific exclusionary mechanisms in a market-oriented society. What links big-budget productions such as those staged at the National Theatre to fringe performances staged at festivals and small public venues is that they are more often than not ticketed affairs *ostensibly* accessible by anyone with the means to afford a seat. In actual material terms such accessibility is largely a fiction, of course, a complexity I will gesture towards at several points throughout this study via particular social relations characteristic of the current neoliberal conjuncture. The broad category of commercial theatre thereby occupies different politico-economic ground to, say, applied or community forms whose audiences are selectively brought together in educative, rehabilitative, or therapeutic contexts and that therefore operate as sites of inclusion for distinct constituencies working towards a specified goal (to the *explicit* exclusion of others). I appreciate that this definition leaves open avenues for critique in regard to, for example, the labour processes involved with performance production and the ways in which they are valorised and rewarded or, indeed, the often-complex funding models that underlie performance work. However, I believe my classification of commercialism is appropriate for the purposes of assessing the political potential of some of the HIV/AIDS genre’s most widely known plays to galvanise, influence, or inculcate a broad spectatorship.

In terms of the plays I have chosen to analyse, therefore, my work is more closely aligned to that of Juntunen. Indeed, I am interested in notions surrounding the
‘mainstream’ and I examine how the commercial success of certain HIV/AIDS plays affects and reflects wider public perceptions about the virus. The conclusions I draw are very different to Juntunen’s, however. I am sceptical of his idea that ‘mainstreaming’ can be a purely progressive force for good that positively assimilates gay men into an imagined national citizenry. Some of the commercially successful HIV/AIDS plays that appear to do this, I will go on to argue, actually support neoliberal ideas that perpetuate marginalising forms of discourse. Unlike Juntunen, I am also interested in works that incorporate non-traditional dramaturgies and performance venues that work within the commercial terrain of theatrical institutions whilst pushing back against the neoliberal tenets to which they necessarily consent, thereby gesturing towards the ways in which the mainstream and the subcultural are amorphous categories that often overlap.

By limiting my scope in this way, therefore, I am able to examine HIV/AIDS theatre as a site of economic activity within the contemporary neoliberal economy. By extension, I may coherently consider how the material realities and content of theatre productions betray a complicated, contradictory and often uncomfortably consensual relationship with a neoliberal hegemonic project grounded in relentless privatisation, competitiveness and the further oppression of already disadvantaged constituencies. By extension, it will go against the aforementioned reduction or desertion of Marxist forms of analysis within the academy that scholars such as Boyle and Crehan have identified. At certain points, therefore, I will return to and build on lines of enquiry already explored by Román before the turn of the millennium. I adopt a similar view to Román regarding his statement that the commodification of theatre doesn’t necessarily refute subversion but rather repositions performance within a context that at once recognizes the
medium’s own implication within mass cultural systems of representation and reception. It’s not as if performance art or performance can be placed outside the inspection by which they hold traditional art accountable, nor can the two be placed outside of the operative tensions of popular culture. Instead, it becomes necessary to consider the degrees of opposition either performance art or performance offer within cultural practices at large. \textit{(Acts of Intervention 121)}

As evidenced by my brief analysis of \textit{Angels’} most recent run at the National Theatre, the need to consider the degrees to which performances oppose wider cultural practices is particularly vital as the institution of theatre becomes further entrenched in free market structures. Whilst the contrary attitudes towards onstage nudity demonstrated by Elliott’s and Donnellan’s productions, for example, may \textit{appear} to represent a minor difference, analysis of this difference has the potential to reveal something of the ways in which neoliberalism exerts a socially conservative force on HIV/AIDS theatre.

\textbf{Hegemony, cultural materialism, and everyday neoliberalism}

As touched on earlier, in combination with a cultural materialist approach to play analysis, I draw on the related work of Antonio Gramsci to provide a theoretical framework for this study. This framework lends itself well to the criticism of neoliberalism and its relationship to queer theatre for several reasons. Firstly, a significant number of Marxist and anti-capitalist scholarly analyses addressing topics involving queer cultures and liberatory struggle have utilised a Gramscian notion of hegemony to consider how cultural and ideological forces have historically shaped the
experiences of the non-heterosexual. As Christine Riddiough noted in a collection of anti-capitalist essays on gay liberation in 1980, although Gramsci was very unlikely to have envisioned his ideas being used in this way,

The gay/lesbian community is one of the best examples of how [...] hegemony works. Gay people, raised generally within straight mainstream culture, are brought up, like non-gays, with the idea that homosexuality is sick, perverted, a threat to “the American Way of Life.” Coming out, realizing ones’ gayness and entering into gay/lesbian culture means each gay person must face those ideas and accept or reject them. (29)

One of the ways in which gay people can overcome oppressive hegemonic ideas, Riddiough goes on to argue, is through subcultural or, indeed, countercultural phenomena such as drag, camp, and gay bars. Dominant hegemonic attitudes surrounding queerness have changed substantially since the early 1980s, of course, but the relevance of Gramsci’s ideas still holds, with scholars such as Peter Drucker and Rosemary Hennessey continuing to apply them to queer anti-capitalist analyses in the twenty-first century (Drucker, Warped; Hennessey).

That Gramsci’s ideas have proven so germane to the study of subcultural arts and practices and their relationship to prevailing societal attitudes should come as no surprise when one considers the ways in which his work has been so fundamental to the development of cultural materialism. In a passage explaining how he came to adopt a particular view on Marxist theory and, by extension, cultural materialist forms of analysis, Williams explains that ‘the practical connections between this kind of cultural theory and the Gramscian account of hegemony and the hegemonic are significant,’ (‘Notes on Marxism’ 246) not least because the re-evaluation of the traditional base-superstructural model postulated by Gramsci has encouraged cultural theorists like
Williams to understand notionally superstructural ideologies encapsulated by art and culture not as abstracted reflections of a productive base, but in themselves constitutive of a shifting and highly complex hegemony which deeply influences individual experiences of reality and ‘is continually active and adjusting; it isn’t just the past, the dry husks of ideology which we can more easily discard’ (Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure’ 39). The idea that cultural works such as novels or plays may have an active role in the always ongoing development of hegemonic thought, therefore, will help to elucidate the knotty ways in which HIV/AIDS theatre interacts with neoliberal ideology. As we will see in later chapters, some other of Williams’ cultural theories that emerge from this view of hegemony lend themselves well to such an elucidation. I refer here most pointedly to his separation of so-called dominant, residual and emergent cultures, a partly temporal distinction which will lend theoretical backing to my analysis of how HIV/AIDS theatre as a genre has changed since the initial production of Angels up to the present day.

On a final note regarding this congruence of theoretical forms, application of Gramscian hegemonic theory will also support the explication of the specific definition of neoliberalism that undergirds my analysis of HIV/AIDS theatre. As Jeremy Gilbert notes in an essay entitled ‘What Kind of Thing Is “Neoliberalism”?’ (2013), the term has undergone various iterations since it was reportedly coined in the 1930s, so it is imperative that one establishes a specific definition in the context of any individual piece of anti-neoliberal critique (7). At its most basic level, Gilbert notes, neoliberalism can be taken to mean the upholding of ‘a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive, and commercial behaviour in citizens’, grounded in the belief that self-interest is ‘the only motive force in human life’ and competition ‘the most efficient
and socially beneficial way for that force to express itself” (9). Formally, however, he avers that neoliberalism can be understood in a number of ways including as an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies, and what Deleuze and Guattari call an “abstract machine.” (8)

The neoliberalism to which I consistently return throughout the following chapters is that of an ongoing hegemonic project that is manifest in so-called everyday neoliberalism. A term borrowed from Philip Mirowski’s study of the Great Recession, Never let a serious crisis go to waste: How neoliberalism survived the financial meltdown (2014), everyday neoliberalism encompasses a set of ‘common-sense’ principles that were first articulated and enacted most clearly in what Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy term ‘first-wave neoliberalism’ during the Reagan and Thatcher years. These principles centred around the notion that individual freedoms could be secured through governmental facilitation of free markets, a notion that was ‘interlaced with the geopolitical imperative to stop the spread of communism and socialist developmentalism in the Third World’ (Steger and Roy 47). Although neoliberalism has altered to accommodate a changing political landscape, its core buttressing of extreme individualism has remained constant, thereby effecting the naturalisation of commercialism and competitiveness to the extent that they permeate almost every aspect of a person’s quotidian experience. It produces ‘a world where competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity a sign of weakness’ and mediates political discourse and policy-making in a way that makes alternative anti-capitalist or socialist forms of governance seem ill-conceived, irrational, or even pathological (Mirowski 92).
Building on Mirowski’s assertions, Raewyn Connell explains in a book chapter entitled ‘Understanding Neoliberalism’ that the contemporary political economy invites novel analytical methodologies with which to uncover how ‘even as the recession fluctuates, neoliberalism remains the common sense of our era’ (22). Indeed, the market has become so naturalised, perhaps apotheosised, that few political commentators entertain the prospect of replacing it. Rather, debates turn to optimising the market for politically beneficial ends, the specifics of which tend to differ depending on the party affiliations of the interlocutors in question. As Connell notes, neoliberalism has permeated governmental institutions to the extent that it ‘is now the ground from which labour parties, conservative parties, and liberal parties will proceed’ (22). The ‘common sense’ that Connell identifies aligns with notions of *senso comune* (*common sense*) explored extensively in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, a collection of fragmentary notes Gramsci penned whilst incarcerated under Mussolini and for which he is best known. ‘Common sense’, Gramsci explains, reflects the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed. Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the “folklore” of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. (419)

‘Common sense’ ideas, then, are those that are easily digested and absorbed by dint of their seemingly indubitable nature. They reflect the commonly held beliefs of a given moment and comprise, as noted by Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea,
a compendium of well-tried knowledge, customary beliefs, wise
sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices, some of which – like “a
little of what you fancy does you good” – seem eminently sensible,
others wildly inaccurate. [Common sense’s] virtue is that it is
obvious. Its watchword is, “Of course!” (9)

Scholars of everyday neoliberalism, therefore, tend to apply a Gramscian notion of
‘common sense’ to a contemporary socio-political environment characterised by
individualism and free-market fundamentalism. The phenomenon is a complex and
often contradictory aggregation of ‘common sense’ ideas and beliefs that conspire to
tell the neoliberal agent that she is ‘all at once the business, the raw material, the
product, the clientele, and the customer of her own life. She is a jumble of assets to be
invested, nurtured, managed and developed’ (Mirowski 108). Indeed, everyday
neoliberalism works on a contradictory level to achieve this ‘all-at-once’-ness,
covering up any ideological contradictions with seemingly innocuous and obvious
axioms. The neoliberal agent may believe that her consumer power, for example,
offers a fabulous degree of personal freedom. However, the power to exercise such
freedom is often dependent on the successful navigation of an increasingly corporate
labour market that demands the fulfilment of evermore stringent (and decidedly
subjugating) personal targets and performance appraisals.

Of course, the ‘common sense’ ideas that have come to comprise contemporary
neoliberalism did not appear accidentally. They have been captured, nurtured and
furthered as part of a hegemonic project that, as David Harvey notes, has its roots in
theories put forward decades ago by groups of economists and intellectuals made up
of figures such as Freidrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, all of whom were
dissatisfied with the Keynesian policies implemented throughout much of the world in
the 1930s in response to the Great Depression (A Brief History of Neoliberalism 20).
The interventionism advocated by John Maynard Keynes, they argued, meant that the state was able to ‘make decisions on matters of investment and capital accumulation that were bound to be wrong because the information available to the state could not rival that contained in market signals’ (Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism 21). Although the ideas of thinkers such as Hayek were not implemented in an organised or singular manner, they influenced leaders in the capitalist world to take on neoliberalism ‘through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments that […] converged as a new orthodoxy’ (Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism 13). This securing of a new orthodoxy is synonymous with the process of hegemony, another vital aspect of Gramscian political philosophy that is tightly entwined with the notion of ‘common sense’ and the ways in which it operates. Throughout the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci considers how dominant political powers have historically exerted societal control, examining the ways in which force, coercion and consent help to secure ideological supremacy. He identifies ‘two major superstructural “levels”’ through which such dominance is captured:

the one that can be called “civil society”, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”, and that of “political society” or “the State”. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “juridical” government. (12)

Hegemony, then, is a form of social control that operates on a ‘private’ level. It does not influence behaviour externally through overt command but works to secure the so-called ‘consent’ of the masses through covert shaping of prevailing social norms. As Joseph V. Femia puts it, hegemony ‘refers to an order in which a common social-moral
language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour,’ and it is this social-moral language that serves to articulate and concretise ‘common sense’ notions in the public consciousness (24).

In the context of everyday neoliberalism, such social-moral language has helped to conscript people to a conceptual norm centred on a hyper-capitalist system, a process Stuart Hall refers to as the logic of ‘spin’. In an interview discussing the tactics of the UK Labour party during the increasingly neoliberal New Labour period of the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Hall argues that this logic worked ‘to detach concepts from their previous associations and shift them to new meanings. You can also see this process when [the Labour Party] banished “equality” from the vocabulary and started to talk about fairness; when they banished “capital” and started to talk about free markets’ (qtd. in Hall and Massey 64). Such shifts, whilst perhaps seemingly innocuous, served to modify public consciousness regarding the individual’s place in economic and political systems. Indeed, what Hall implies here is that the lexical shift from ‘equality’ to ‘fairness’ reveals how neoliberalism’s hegemonic project exerts a kind of value system on its citizenry: with people increasingly conceptualised as entrepreneurs and customers of their own lives, a measurable value system starts to emerge that is dependent on one’s ability to accrue wealth. It is no mistake, I argue, that we commonly refer to some of the world’s wealthiest individuals as being ‘worth’ a given sum of money. Whilst the word ‘equality’, then, appears to suggest that individual lives are of equal worth and value to society, ‘fairness’ shifts this message to infer that people should be esteemed and rewarded according to how ‘deserving’ they are (i.e. how effectively they are able to navigate capitalist structures). This is tied in with the increasing emphasis on the freedom of the market Hall mentions, which
inculcates notions that the realm of commerce offers ‘equality of opportunity’ for all members of a given citizenry. At the same time, the de-emphasis on the notion of ‘capital’, a necessary component of material production, represents an attempt to camouflage the fact that money becomes easier to generate the more of it you have.

With everyday neoliberalism interpenetrating the workings of society on such a fundamental and often covert level, therefore, its implications go far beyond the realm of the economic. As Gramsci was keen to emphasise in his explication of hegemony, wider cultural phenomena are tightly interwoven with and sensitive to the vicissitudes of the market. Or, as Joel Magnuson puts it, ‘culture is never neutral. It is the same forces that cause the evolutionary drift of our economic institutions that cause changes in cultural symbols and our mindset’ (152). The potential ways for everyday neoliberalism to affect theatre as an institution, market sector and art form, therefore, are myriad, and its relationship to the HIV/AIDS genre is particularly complex. To start making sense of this relationship, it is important to appreciate the patent ways in which neoliberal legislative powers exacted harm on HIV/AIDS sufferers during the early years of the epidemic (particularly in the US) generated widespread backlash in the form of protests by activist groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). As Tamar W. Carroll notes, ‘AIDS activists correctly saw cultural and economic issues as linked and sought to combat both anti-gay sentiment and the ascending neoliberalism of the Reagan era’ (133), a political stance with which many early HIV/AIDS playwrights vocally sympathised. Indeed, this theatrical work can be delineated as incorporating elements of the emergent in the sense that Williams prescribes. In contradistinction to residual culture, elements of which, despite being formed in the relatively distant past are still often active in the cultural process, the emergent involves the creation of ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new
relationships and kinds of relationship’ that do not merely represent ‘some new phase of the dominant culture’ (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 123). Emergent culture must, strictly speaking, offer alternative or oppositional modes of thought and expression because, ‘since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant’ or hegemonic (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 123). In explicitly challenging the custodians of neoliberal institutions in this way, therefore, some of the earlier examples of HIV/AIDS theatre I will discuss manage to present a cogent oppositional line of thought that rebukes dominant forms of ‘common sense’.

However, despite railing against the harms caused by the decimation of welfare provisions, such plays were not necessarily immune to some of the seductions offered by the neoliberal ideology they attacked. Indeed, consenting to its credos at least partially is almost inescapable. In the realm of HIV/AIDS theatre, practitioners involved in the creation of plays that peddle anti-capitalist sentiments tend to be necessarily enmeshed in ‘common sense’ notions that compromise such politics. This is because accruing the material means necessary to create, stage and draw audience members to a performance work or play is ineluctably contingent on engaging with neoliberal market structures on some level, however minimal. As will be explored throughout this study, even funding and materials acquired through seemingly philanthropic means such as corporate donations or crowdfunding platforms are necessarily tied up in a corporatist, *quid pro quo* logic: corporations unfailingly expect advertising or private functions in return for their financial aid, whilst crowdfunders often seek less quantifiable returns on their investments such as exposure on social media. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the realm of theatre, of course, but has infiltrated other creative sectors. As author Jedediah Purdy writes in an article entitled
‘The Accidental Neoliberal’, which describes his participation in the corporate world of publishing,

How can one be a neoliberal while rejecting any position called neoliberalism? Neoliberalism is not so much an intellectual position as a condition in which one acts as if certain premises were true, and others unspeakable […] The naturalness of neoliberal premises comes in the way that, in a neoliberal world, to act is to accept them. I suppose I simply mean that I couldn’t do anything but accept them myself. The neoliberal public writer can’t help being on the market, because the market is what any possible public has become. (Purdy)

Purdy’s observations attest to the notion that neoliberal hegemony has reached a pinnacle in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Individualistic and market-oriented values have become such a naturalised part of everyday life that to operate in ways that do not at least partially consent to the neoliberal hegemonic project is almost impossible. For makers of contemporary HIV/AIDS theatre, therefore, particularly those creating work that explicitly pushes back against free-market ideology, such complicity raises issues surrounding the role of political theatre. It raises questions that this study will explore in depth such as: To what extent does everyday neoliberalism shape the political messages of certain plays? What does anti-neoliberal theatre look like in the twenty-first century? And could such a thing even exist?

For Joel Magnuson, the sheer power of market corporations to impact the lives of a global citizenry demonstrates that neoliberal ideologues have secured a kind of ideological dominance for the foreseeable future. In a chapter entitled ‘Everyday Neoliberalism’, Magnuson bemoans that the ‘pathological system conditions that are embedded in this [neoliberal] hegemony are accordingly fixed. There is no turning
back from this and there is no fix’ (162). Such despair is, perhaps, understandable in an era permeated by an unflinching faith in the free market’s ability to improve people’s lives and enrich the ‘deserving’ despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The current climate emergency illustrates this particularly well, Magnuson argues, as it shines a light on a global populace so inculcated by everyday neoliberalism that it scrabbles for logical loopholes to accommodate its ideological doctrine, particularly in the face of scientific findings that evidence corporatism’s destructive force: ‘Even when the physical world is reeling from climate change […] widespread cognitive dissonance obliges us to cling even harder to the belief that unencumbered financial markets will always accrue’ despite the fact that such beliefs could represent an existential threat to humanity (161).

The apocalyptic trajectory Magnuson describes, however, is not necessarily consistent with the Gramscian notion of hegemony I adopt. This is because his imagined fixity of dominant structures does not align with the notion of hegemony as an always unstable project requiring constant negotiation and renegotiation to maintain supremacy in the minds of a given citizenry. It also implicitly dismisses the potential for emergent movements to be subsumed into, and reshape, the dominant culture, as well as recalibrate widespread ‘common sense’ notions. As Hall so concisely puts it:

No project achieves “hegemony” as a completed project. It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are permanent or final. Hegemony has constantly to be “worked on”, maintained, renewed, revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions […] and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew. (‘The Neoliberal Revolution’ 26)
Indeed, everyday neoliberalism does not work so covertly as to be invisible. It is a named phenomenon that has been enthusiastically derided by throngs of scholars, after all, demonstrating a healthy degree of conscious opposition to its effects. Furthermore, whilst it is virtually impossible to completely escape the trappings of everyday neoliberalism whilst working on a theatrical production, it is perfectly possible to interrogate its ideological vulnerabilities and worry at its logical holes from within the auditorium itself. Indeed, it is this negotiation between consent and opposition that my study is interested in exploring in the context of HIV/AIDS theatre, a question that feels particularly pressing during an era of Trumpian populist politics.

A note on the organisation of this study

The trajectory of this study is loosely organised by chronology, theme and form, with later chapters focusing on plays produced after the millennium, an important temporal juncture that will be expanded on shortly. Chapter One starts by providing an overview of the HIV/AIDS genre before Angels appeared in its two-part form, examining the ways in which plays performed in this period have been historicised, analysed and reproduced over the past few decades. To help me establish a coherent genealogy of the genre, I draw from a conceptual framework established by performance scholar Therese Jones in 1994 which bifurcates HIV/AIDS plays into two generations. First-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, Jones explains, is generally assimilatory in tone, adopting conservative narratives of monogamous gay love in order to ‘redeem’ the stigmatised HIV-positive character and avoid affronting the gatekeepers of dominant hegemonic thought (x). Second-generation theatre, on the other hand, which emerged
several years after the epidemic made headlines, is less concerned with appealing to wide audiences. It is more experimental in form and more willing to overtly criticise the ways in which neoliberal governance has inflicted harm on the HIV-positive: an exemplary emergent form as Williams would have it. That second-generation plays have been sidelined by the vast majority of scholars and theatre practitioners since the turn of the millennium, therefore, is a befitting illustration of the temporal relation that undergirds Williams’ designation of dominant, residual, and emergent forms of culture. Rather than launching a successful case against the neoliberal governance harming the HIV-positive, second-generation theatre simply disappeared as a consequence of neoliberalism’s ever-tightening grip on the world. Emergence is a process and does not necessarily entail eventual incorporation into a shifting dominant culture. Indeed, that first-generation HIV/AIDS plays are frequently revived whilst their second-generation counterparts have largely been confined to the annals of history simply demonstrates that the latter was too far removed from prevailing ideologies and cultural forms to survive. Such a sharp distinction between first- and second-generation plays helpfully lays the groundwork for what I term third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, a category that contains both elements of the dominant and the emergent. Delimited to the crop of HIV/AIDS-related plays produced after the turn of the millennium, the third generation is much more diverse than its predecessors. Shaped by the introduction of life-saving protease inhibitors combined with the successes of the neoliberal project identified by scholars such as Purdy and Magnuson, its plays respond to the increased corporatisation of theatre as an institution and the ways in which the lived experiences of the HIV-positive have shifted over the past two decades. It represents a departure from the overtly experimental and anti-neoliberal spirit of the second-generation, instead grappling with issues surrounding HIV/AIDS
that are unique to the socio-political and economic landscape of the twenty-first century such as the proliferation of digital hook-up technologies and the legacy of the epidemic’s early years.

Chapter Two attempts to expand Jones’s definition of second-generation theatre, filling in the temporal gap between 1994 when she first disseminated her generational categories and the year 2000, when I conceptualise the third generation as emerging. During this premillennial period, neoliberal ideologues took up forms of evangelical millenarian rhetoric to compound the stigmatisation experienced by queer communities, particularly in the US, adopting a kind of ‘religious neoliberalism’ that spurned the HIV-positive as apocalyptic harbingers whilst simultaneously anticipating the dawn of a new millennium of prosperity driven by free market fundamentalism. In reaction, second-generation plays produced during the height of pre-millennial fever such as Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* (1992) and Paul Rudnick’s *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1999) continued the work of earlier second-generation playwrights by presenting oppositional plays that condemned the socially conservative and neoliberal ideologues who worked to silence and oppress them.

After the millennium, the anti-neoliberal fervour of the emergent second generation quickly faded, bringing with it the swift inauguration of a third. Chapter Three is the first to explore this new wave of HIV/AIDS theatre, addressing the ways in which the Web 2.0 economy that emerged around the *fin-de-millénaire* shaped the development of the genre. I conceptualise the structure of the Web 2.0 economy as reflective of wider neoliberal tenets, despite claims that its facilitation of the so-called ‘sharing economy’ serves to push against the hypercompetitive qualities of neoliberal culture. Indeed, I take issue with the notion that online spaces are somehow
immanently liberatory or able to operate outside of capitalistic structures, arguing instead that digital culture has in many ways supported and even accelerated the project of neoliberal hegemony. More specifically, I explore how hook-up apps, which frequently appear in contemporary HIV/AIDS theatre, activate and exploit a variety of everyday neoliberal impulses in Lachlan Philpott’s *Bison* (2009) and Patrick Cash’s *The HIV Monologues* (2016). I then go on to analyse the ways in which the economics of theatre has been shaped by an increasingly digital world, addressing the politics of crowdfunding HIV/AIDS theatre in light of the continued erosion of state funding for the arts, particularly following the Great Recession. Using Shaun Kitchener’s crowdfunded *Positive* (2015) as a case study, the chapter concludes that the act of crowdfunding actually amplifies some of the individualistic and competitive impulses that characterise everyday neoliberalism, curtailing any drive to challenge the dominant culture and raising questions about the ways in which an increasingly privatised theatre sector is influencing the kinds of HIV/AIDS plays that continue to get produced and staged.

In Chapter Four, I attempt to account for an apparent upsurge in solo performance pieces within the third generation of HIV/AIDS theatre. I examine possible reasons for the increased popularity of the form by interrogating the notion (posited by a number of scholars of solo performance) that it is unique in its ability to rouse a community of like-minded theatregoers against a common cause within the theatre. Using Miranda Joseph’s *Against the Romance of Community* (2002) as a starting point, I question assertions that community formation is an immanently counterhegemonic (or emergent) project, arguing that many solo performances of the third generation fail to account for the fact that theatre as an institution is deeply embedded within the anatomy of mainstream capitalism. I start with a materialist examination of London’s
Royal Vauxhall Tavern, a performance venue renowned as the home of many subcultural solo performances and performers such as David Hoyle, moving on to look at Neil Watkins’ solo performance *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2010) and the ways in which the performer subverts the conversational and testimonial modes of direct address traditionally associated with solo HIV/AIDS performances to question the function of community-building. The conclusions I draw from this examination are somewhat ambivalent in regards to the respective plays’ efficacy in challenging neoliberal hegemony, in that both Hoyle and Watkins acknowledge the need for emergent forms within the field of HIV/AIDS theatre, but appear unable to see beyond the market requirements of the theatrical institution as it currently operates.

Finally, Chapter Five returns to issues surrounding the historicisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, focusing on the ways in which many third-generation playwrights have grappled with the idea that queer-identified individuals can (or should) claim ownership over a narratively coherent and collective history or ‘heritage’. More specifically, I will examine two recent works – the GHP Collective’s *The Gay Heritage Project* (2013) and Matthew Lopez’s *The Inheritance* (2018) – uncovering the ways in which both plays attempt to undermine the harmful effects of late capitalism on the queer and HIV-positive. Despite the plays’ direct engagement with anti-capitalist ideas, I ultimately argue that any gesture towards an anti-neoliberal politics are compromised by its creators’ insistent return to a romantic homonormativity yoked to neoliberal structures. This return is particularly vital to note in relation to *The Inheritance*, as the play’s clear anti-Trump message is frequently undermined by a return to an old neoliberal status quo, throwing up questions about the need for more urgent forms of anti-capitalist theatre in volatile political times.
The impulse to track the changing dynamics of HIV/AIDS theatre, particularly by separating the genre’s many plays into historical or generational subsets, has represented a common preoccupation amongst performance scholars since the mid-1990s. Indeed, the feverishly shifting dynamics of the epidemic and its attendant socio-political consequences over the years, as well as the shifting politics of theatre as an institution, have resulted in a markedly heterogeneous body of work that can, for the most part, be grouped into generational subcategories, each containing thematically and structurally linked plays. Perhaps the most cited, referenced and occasionally contested of such generational designations is that posited by Therese Jones in her edited collection of HIV/AIDS plays entitled *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances* (1994). Jones makes the case that, at the time of the volume’s publication in 1994, two distinguishable generations had emerged out of the HIV/AIDS genre. As she explained in a publicity interview for the collection, ‘First-generation plays like *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* were more traditional in form and definitely more sentimental […] They were educationally driven. They disseminated information about AIDS to the gay community, as well as to the straight community about gays’ (qtd. in Breslauer). Second-generation plays, on the other hand, were much less focused on disseminating information designed to help individuals cope with the consequences of AIDS as they were examining the wider political dimensions of the disease. This move away from pedagogy liberated the genre to a certain degree, allowing playwrights to produce work that was far more experimental
in form and overtly political, resisting the urge to employ AIDS as ‘a mechanism for humanizing or redeeming the gay character’ (Jones qtd. in Breslauer).

In other words, the second generation of plays was associated with a much more starkly anti-normative form of politics, as playwrights rejected the impulse to gain acceptance within a heteronormative culture that so often tried to censor or ignore the AIDS crisis, embracing instead what might be thought of as a ‘queerer’ dramaturgy. Writing in 2001, Torsten Graff supported Jones’s notion that the 1990s was a particularly transformative time for gay theatre, stating that

> Over the last decade, gay drama has become more and more queer. The subtitle of Therese Jones’s anthology [...] indicates not only a changed political, social and medical context for AIDS plays and performances, but simultaneously highlights a shift in the dramatic representation of AIDS. While the AIDS plays of the eighties were highly conventional plays in the tradition of naturalism and realism, dramatic texts of the past ten years [...] cannot be adequately understood without queer theory or the influence of more than a decade of queer ACT-UP activism. (23)

While the term ‘queer’ is wildly polysemic and etymologically complex, within the context of Graff’s essay it is deployed in rather general terms to signify counterhegemonic thought and, by extension, a repudiation of heteronormativity. In this sense, Graff delineates the queer in a similar way to Peter Drucker who, unsatisfied with the word ‘gay’ for having ‘increasingly, perhaps irremediably, been claimed by the mainstream,’ concedes that ‘no single word – neither “queer” nor any other – can fully encompass the broad discourse that is needed by the LGBT left’ (*Warped* 11). This is reflected by queer’s inability to elude co-optation by the dominant culture and seen, for example, in the popularity of reality television shows such as *Queer Eye,*
which conceptualises queer as a kind of key to self-betterment within the competitive dominant hegemony (Sackur). However, in spite of, or perhaps even because of the slipperiness of the word ‘queer’, Drucker comes to its defence as a valuable tool in anti-capitalist discourse, noting that

queer still implies, as it has done since its emergence as a current in the early 1990s, rebellion and gender bending. It still evokes subversion of the gay conformism that is steadily being consolidated in more and more parts of the globe. (Warped 11)

Certainly, second-generation theatre started to embody the subversive streak captured by the term ‘queer’ as the early 1990s came around, a shift which, as Graff notes, allowed playwrights to align their work more closely with the countercultural spirit of ACT UP. As Tamar W. Carroll explains, the group’s memorable collective actions – which included successfully seizing control of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1988 and enveloping the home of brazenly homophobic US Senator Jesse Helms in a giant, fifteen-foot condom in 1991 – were examples of the group’s engagement with the so-called ‘culture wars’ that were taking place in the US at the time. Often used as a catch-all term to describe the antagonisms felt between conservative ideologues and progressive voices across a range of social justice movements, the culture wars were

directly tied to the Religious Right and pro-family movement’s attempts to regulate national morality and to conservatives’ successful attacks on the welfare state. Because religious conservatives perceived abortion and gay rights as unwarranted state intrusion into the private realm of family, they supported economic conservatives’ efforts to eliminate or shrink social welfare programs, substituting negative liberty and the
The harm exerted by this neoconservative-neoliberal coalition, something examined in depth in the next chapter of this study, galvanised the anti-establishment fervour of second-generational playwrights and helped to shape the new, ‘queerer’ dramatic representations of AIDS Graff observes.

Other critical responses to Jones’s theatrical generationalism support this idea that HIV/AIDS playwrights adopted a queer, anti-neoliberal dramaturgy during the 1990s as the American culture wars raged. Noreen Barnes-McLain, for example, writing in 1997, identified an unorthodox approach towards temporality within second-generation theatre that reflects its anti-normative roots:

[The] shift in focus in this second generation of theatre pieces was to that concerning the quality of time spent while living. As in the first wave of works, there is no question of whether one will die, and how one meets one’s death is still the central action of the play […] Many AIDS plays are very specifically tied to time, filled with topical references, from politicians in office to the drug du jour. However, the style in which the topic is addressed changes, opens up into elements of the fantastic and farcical as playwrights ordered a response to the absurdity of the crisis. (Barnes-McLain 117)

By trivialising longevity and familial duty, then, second-generation theatre rejects heteronormative and capitalistic structures that perpetuate such temporal obsessions. At a wider level, this uncomfortable relationship with the linear temporality of heteronormativity has been a focus point within queer theory ever since HIV/AIDS wreaked havoc on the life expectancies of countless gay men. Leo Bersani’s 1995 polemic Homos, for example, questioned mainstream America’s obsession with
familial longevity and aversion to illness while demanding ‘a future without discrimination even as AIDS makes us wonder how much of a future we have’ (20). Since then, various other works of queer theory have emerged exploring the links between sexuality, temporality and heteronormative political economy including José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Kevin Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009), and Drucker’s aforementioned *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anticapitalism* (2014), all of which touch on the spatio-temporal politics of HIV/AIDS. In this way, then, it is clear why Graff asserted that audiences of second-generational theatre must be well-versed in queer theory to fully grasp their meanings and intentions. The plays Jones designated as second-generational subvert linear narrative conventions and question the valorisation of longevity in a way that reflected queer political ideas at the time. Thus, as parts of this study will explore, second-generational theatre was intrinsically counterhegemonic and, either explicitly or implicitly, anti-neoliberal in its politics.

The fact that Jones identified a generational dimension to HIV/AIDS theatre in the year 1994 is important to the thrust of this study thanks to its temporal proximity to politically disruptive events such as the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in the US in 1993 and the FDA’s approval of the first commercially available protease inhibitors in 1995. Around this time, political imperatives started to shift for HIV/AIDS playwrights, most pronouncedly in the US, as they no longer had to contend with a Republican political establishment who flagrantly ignored the escalating deaths of AIDS patients across the country. With HIV no longer necessarily representing a terminal diagnosis, playwrights began focusing on how people were negotiating living with the virus as a chronic condition. This shift did not mean, of course, that the oppressive forces of neoliberal governance simply evaporated for the
HIV-positive but, as we will see, that they exerted themselves in new ways. Over the following chapter, I aim to build on Jones’s thesis, providing updated definitions of first- and second-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, as well as moving towards defining its third generation – a generation that has largely been overlooked within theatre scholarship and will occupy the majority of this study.

**Reviving and reinforcing homonormativity: First-generation AIDS plays on the contemporary stage**

To begin updating and reassessing Therese Jones’s definition of first- and second-generational theatre, it is important to understand how attitudes towards HIV/AIDS plays have gradually evolved since the 1980s and ‘90s. As Jones points out, playwrights addressing AIDS during this time often felt obliged to inflect their work with a strongly pedagogical tone, with many promoting monogamy and conservative social structures as the necessary means to mitigate chances of infection. Correspondingly, argued Emmanuel Nelson in 1990, solemn and pedagogical portrayals of AIDS involving monogamous gay men proliferated in US fiction during this time, most of which, partly by dint of the genre’s elitism, was ‘solidly middle-class, concerned largely with the lives of white, urban professionals’ (53). The dramaturgical experimentation of second-generation theatre, however, served to highlight the ways in which the stage was uniquely suited to ‘postulate an alternative discourse which opposes hierarchical structures, asserts subjectivity, and challenges cultural suppression of sexuality’ through ‘the exhilarating and empowering fusion of carnival […] and the politics of representation’ (Jones, T. xi). In other words, the communitarian aspects of theatre could galvanise, energise, and attract audience
members in a way that novelists or, presumably, other kinds of artists, could not. Despite their ostensibly less didactic essence and greater experimental freedoms, however, a majority of second-generation plays and performance pieces have now faded into obscurity or are confined primarily to discussion in academic journals. One of the main differences between the early years of the crisis and now, of course, is that protease inhibitors have allowed HIV-positive people’s life expectancies in the West to approach those of people who are HIV-negative. As such, the urgency originally displayed by playwrights such as Larry Kramer or William Hoffman has been replaced by what some academics and artists have identified as a jarringly expurgated and nostalgic representation of AIDS in the arts; a willingly reductive co-optation of an ongoing global crisis by neoliberal purveyors of cultural wares.

To explain how this nostalgia operates, I turn to a poster piece entitled Your Nostalgia is Killing Me by visual artists Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier, which incisively deconstructs how the history of HIV/AIDS has been commodified (Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier). In an interview about the piece, Bradley-Perrin explains:

When we celebrate and idolize certain community actions and successes [of the 1980s and ‘90s], we close the conversation to ongoing struggles for treatment access and healthcare access. And as we canonize certain producers of culture and certain moments of memory, we are also closing a space in which a complication of narratives could arise through varied experience. The unevenness of experience that existed then, as it does now, make[s] necessary the production of false memories that unify nostalgia—

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2 According to recent data from a study conducted for The Lancet HIV, the life expectancy of a 20-year-old patient starting antiretroviral therapy during 2008–10, who had a CD4 count of more than 350 cells per μL 1 year after starting ART, was 78.0 years (The Antiretroviral Therapy Cohort Collaboration).
but they dislocate the lived experiences of the past in the present. What we are left with are palatable and commodified “memor[ies]” representative of the past in the present. (qtd. in Visual AIDS)

In short, Bradley-Perrin takes issue with the ways in which many contemporary cultural products historicise the pre-protease-inhibitor years of the epidemic, nostalgically focusing on the triumphs of carefully selected activist actions in order to create easily digestible films or ‘commodities’ for their audiences, rather than coherently tracking the ways in which the virus continues to have an impact in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the notion that HIV/AIDS has become commodified or sentimentalised in this way can be directly correlated with the everyday neoliberalisation of culture. The idea that morbidity and oppression still blight the lives of HIV-positive people, and that certain individuals and groups within society may remain accountable for this, does not necessarily sit well within a culture of hyper-individualism. Indeed, such demands for accountability are not ‘commonsensical’ within the boundaries of the neoliberal hegemonic project as the people or institutions who would rightfully be held responsible for wrongdoings also tend to be drivers of profit.

As Stuart Hall notes, the neoliberal state is fated never to interfere with people’s seemingly ‘God-given right to make profits and amass personal wealth’ (‘The Neoliberal Revolution’ 10). Rather than acknowledge that the lives of the HIV-positive could be bettered by welfare reforms or by demanding that parties who contributed to historical AIDS deaths accept accountability for their wrongdoing, ‘nostalgic’ cultural products reduce the subject of HIV/AIDS to something historicised and sentimentalised. Bradley-Perrin identifies the legacy of the iconic SILENCE=DEATH poster and slogan created by Gran Fury, a group of visual-artists-cum-AIDS-activists
in New York, as exemplary of this trend (qtd. in Visual AIDS). The focal point of the poster is a pink triangle resemblant of the pink triangles homosexual men were forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps, thus drawing clear comparisons between the genocidal actions of the Nazi regime and the wilful inaction of the US government to address AIDS. Since the creation of the image in 1987, however, Bradley-Perrin explains, its original meaning has been diluted:

Memories of the significance of this image are not just informed by this moment but are also informed by the years of use and reuse and overuse of this image and are digested not only as memories of the moment but memories of the canonization of the image. When this is told in stories, shared between generations [...] we don’t remember its specific claims to genocide [...] It becomes an image of AIDS point finale. (qtd. in Visual AIDS)

The scores of consumer products emblazoned with Gran Fury’s original iconography that are now sold by corporate giants such as Amazon are exemplary of how this shift in meaning has occurred. As one Amazon retailer notes in the description of a SILENCE=DEATH t-shirt, the garment is ‘designed for peaceful protest, marches and campaigning against keeping quiet and being silenced by the media’ as well as to ‘show your respect and pride for each other’ (‘Silence=Death T-Shirt’), vague and sentimentalised messaging that represents a far cry from the anti-genocidal rhetoric of ACT UP protests. In purchasing the t-shirt, then, neoliberal subjects are able to promote themselves as caring and moral individuals through the affective appreciation of a bowdlerised account of history.

To better comprehend how such displays of affect operate in relation to HIV/AIDS in the twenty-first century, I turn to the digital platforms through which they often materialise: social media, blogs and other online public outlets. Indeed, the years
following the turn of the millennium have bestowed unprecedented powers to publish and disseminate content on anyone with access to an internet connection. During the early years of such technologies, much of the world was abuzz with talk of social media’s potential to galvanise protest movements and launch powerful attacks on an oppressive status quo. However, it has become abundantly clear that the net has not evaded the clutches of everyday neoliberalism, with online users and companies primarily using the platform to generate new (and often veiled) forms of capital. In many ways, the advent of new technologies has only served to shift the materiality of profit-making from exploitation of physical resources to what Luis Suarez-Villa terms ‘intangibles’ such as creativity, knowledge and, of course, affect. As he explains in a monograph on the subject, the increasing reliance on such intangibles to drive profit is part of a burgeoning project known as ‘technocapitalism’, ‘a new kind of corporatism [which strives to gain] authoritarian control over technology’ (2). Owing to the reproducibility of intangibles (which can be viewed, copied and shared for free in many cases), the way in which value can be extracted from commodities such as Tweets, blogs or online posts is much more complex than for tangible objects, requiring corporations to come up with increasingly inventive ways to monetise intangibles through access restrictions and other more tacit forms of control. Within the context of theatre productions, displays of online affect that attest to a play’s emotional power and impressive stylistics may encourage the original poster’s friends or acquaintances to purchase tickets, thereby generating revenue for the theatre venue and bolstering the reputations of those involved with the creation of the play. The posters themselves may also personally benefit from their Tweets or messages as they serve to cultivate the personal ‘brand’ demanded by the tacit mechanisms of everyday neoliberalism. Indeed, everyday neoliberalism has cashed in on the digital revolution
by inculcating a culture in which the ‘online self’ has become a necessary appendage that can be used to develop social capital, make personally gainful connections with others, and generally cultivate a marketable self. In this way, websites such as Twitter and Facebook provide convenient forums for consumers of culture to comment on plays, artworks or films, allowing its users to conduct affective displays as expedient tools for self-promotion.

Of course, with Tweets and other forms of social media providing such an obvious pathway for profit-generation, commercial theatres have become increasingly keen to encourage punters to engage in online discussions about productions. As Dirk Gindt discusses in an essay featured in Viral Dramaturgies, staging sentimental HIV/AIDS plays that lend themselves well to online displays of affect represents one way of doing this. Gindt provides an analysis of how everyday neoliberal digital culture influences the ways in which early (or first-generation) AIDS plays are adapted for a contemporary audience, honing in on how Swedish playwright Jonas Gardell’s 1989 play Ömheten [Tenderness] was adapted for a 2012 television series entitled Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar [Don’t Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves] and revived onstage by Stockholm City Theatre in the same year. After conducting an extensive Twitter search using #torkaaldrigtårar, Gindt observes that, as a platform for audience members to air their thoughts on the work, the site almost became a ground for competitive testimonies of weeping, sparking ‘a competition of who would cry more, faster and better’ (247). He also notes that

The twenty-first century neoliberal subjects tweeting or posting their affective responses were grounding their emotional self-identification in vague notions of ‘tolerance’ and ‘diversity’ and a combination of sentimentality and nostalgia rather than a critical
investigation of how the AIDS epidemic of the past continues to influence contemporary mechanisms of sexual regulation, HIV policy and stigmatisation. (248)

The television production and revival of the play, then, encouraged viewers to ignore the ways in which HIV/AIDS remains a political issue by exploiting their desire for sentimentalised narratives uncomplicated by the serpentine political terrain the HIV-positive are forced to navigate in the present. Rather than increasing awareness of issues surrounding legislation and stigma, for example, the process of revival offers ample opportunity for neoliberal subjects to lament the political missteps of the past through affective posturing that functions as a kind of productive work designed to boost likes and shares.

In some respects, Gindt’s dismissal of emotional display in favour of ‘critical investigation’ ignores the involuntary, complex and multifaceted elements of affective response. While the social media users he examined may have been hoping to promote themselves as ‘tolerant’ and thus gain some kind of social validation, the plot of Ömheten is undoubtedly affecting, as its young and likeable protagonist Rasmus dies a slow and painful death from AIDS, while his lover watches on. Gindt’s dismissal of affective display is further demonstrated in the introduction to Viral Dramaturgies, in which he and Campbell note that watching young people weep in response to cultural narratives of HIV/AIDS is ‘a reminder that there is now a huge gap in knowledge around the history of HIV and AIDS among younger generations, whether queer or straight. It requires a multiplicity of artistic, pedagogical and activist responses to sit alongside and complicate the multiplex versions of history’ (Campbell and Gindt 23). While some kind of knowledge gap likely exists, citing such impassioned displays as simple proof of generational ignorance is a reductive move when considering the
multitudinous ways in which affect operates in performative spaces. As will be explored in Chapter Two of this study, for example, second-generation solo performer Tim Miller used what Jill Dolan has termed ‘utopian performatives’ in his play *My Queer Body* to rally audiences to imagine the political potentialities of gathering in the theatre. If a sense of shared affect can pass between audience members and performers, encouraging them to communicate and even think about engaging in forms of political activism, then affect-driven HIV/AIDS plays might conceivably be read as counterhegemonic projects rather than as cynical tools for self-promotion.

To be fair to Gindt’s reading, however, we cannot isolate *My Queer Body* from its unique socio-political moment of the early 1990s, which had not yet been complicated by the hyperconnectivity of contemporary online communication and was characterised by a neoliberal hegemony still in its relative infancy. As Byung-Chul Han has observed, the very concept of ‘community’ and the way in which social agents interact has seen seismic shifts in the twenty-first century thanks to the proliferation of online communication channels. The notion of freedom, Han says, including the freedom to communicate freely and openly online, stands in to disguise a compulsive drive for achievement and self-optimisation that spawns from everyday neoliberalism:

We are living in a particular phase of history: freedom itself is bringing forth compulsion and constraint. The freedom of *Can* generates even more coercion than the disciplinarian *Should*, which issues commandments and prohibition. *Should* has a limit. In contrast, *Can* has none. Thus, the compulsion entailed by *Can* is unlimited. Technically, freedom means the opposite of coercion and compulsion […] But now freedom itself, which is supposed to be the opposite of constraint, is producing coercion. (2-3)
Such a coercive push towards self-betterment, then, has implications for the neoliberal subject’s social interactions and the meaning of community. Han continues:

As the entrepreneur of the self, the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be free of purpose […] Originally, being free meant being among friends. ‘Freedom’ and ‘friendship’ have the same root in Indo-European languages. Fundamentally, freedom signifies a relationship […] But today’s neoliberal regime leads to utter isolation; as such, it does not really free us at all. (2-3)

The idea of freedom within the online community, Han implies, could not be any more discordant with the Marxist conception of community as equipping the individual with ‘the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible’ (Marx and Engels 86). As will be examined to various ends throughout this study, particularly through the work of Miranda Joseph, community under neoliberalism necessarily subsumes relationships between people into the spheres of labour and exchange. For example, in Han’s description of neoliberalism as ‘the capitalism of “Like”’—referring, of course, to the ‘Like’ button found across social media channels—people subjugate themselves to dominant socio-economic and political forces by communicating in a way which appears to be free and potentially generous, but is in fact constructed by neoliberal hegemony’s tacit impetus towards self-promotion (15).

While Gindt’s dismissal of online affective display may seem to suffer from a certain short-sightedness, it cannot be denied that his thesis chimes with the technocapitalist trends Han warns against. To further interrogate Gindt’s ideas about contemporary responses to twentieth-century representations of HIV/AIDS, therefore, and to track the changing ways in which first- and second-generation HIV/AIDS
theatre operates in the twenty-first century, I will briefly examine a 2011 Broadway revival of Larry Kramer’s 1985 play *The Normal Heart*, arguably the best-known and most frequently revived piece of HIV/AIDS theatre after *Angels in America*. The semi-autobiographical play recounts the early years of the AIDS crisis between 1981 and 1984 in New York and the genesis of the advocacy group Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), weaving didactic monologues against homosexual promiscuity and inadequate AIDS research funding with a tragic love story that sees activist Ned (a figure clearly representing Kramer) forced to witness the death of his closeted lover, Felix. During its first run, this blend of sentimentality and didacticism was used to appeal to both the audience members’ political consciences and their empathic capacities. Indeed, Kramer initially experienced a degree of success in his aims, with a *New York Times* critic describing the play as

>a fiercely polemical drama about the private and public fallout of the AIDS epidemic [in which] the playwright starts off angry, soon gets furious and then skyrockets into sheer rage. Although Mr. Kramer’s theatrical talents are not always as highly developed as his conscience, there can be little doubt that *The Normal Heart* is the most outspoken play around – or that it speaks up about a subject that justifies its author’s unflagging, at times even hysterical, sense of urgency. (Rich)

Such success in responding to the emergent crisis, however, is what renders *The Normal Heart* very much of its time and brings into question the purpose of reviving it for a contemporary audience. Obviously, Kramer was not writing with twenty-first century viewers in mind or considering the play’s longevity when he first penned it; rather, his agenda ran along activist lines, likely measuring success by the number of theatregoers that could be riled up and impassioned about combatting the AIDS crisis.
It is in this way that we might read a revival of the play – as Bradley-Perrin or Gindt would put it – as a potential piece of ‘AIDS nostalgia’; as an erroneous historicisation of a disease that still affects millions of lives. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to question the ethical landscape such revivals must navigate, particularly when they are, like The Normal Heart, so grounded in the socio-political environment of the 1980s. After all, canonising a play which uses a sentimental love story to galvanise political action has the potential to myopically drive its audience’s affective impulses towards a grief for AIDS sufferers of the past, to the exclusion of its HIV-positive contemporaries.

Despite this shaky ethical terrain, it should be noted that the producers of Broadway’s 2011 production made sure to gesture towards the ongoing problems associated with HIV/AIDS. In fact, in a piece for the Quarterly Journal of Speech entitled ‘Reviving Rage’, Isaac West argues that, contrary to the idea of The Normal Heart as a relic of its time and a document of the crisis years, its 2011 revival actually constituted an effective piece of educational and activist theatre, concluding that by ‘emphasizing the play’s non-fictional nature and evoking compassion and sympathy, it reinforced the gravity of the subject matter by reminding the audience that HIV/AIDS impacts real people, now as it did then’ (100). One of the main ways in which this was achieved, West posits, was through the distribution of a letter to audience members penned by Kramer himself, headed ‘PLEASE KNOW’. In it, Kramer makes the following entreaty to the audience:

Please know that there is no one in charge of this plague. This is a war for which there is no general and for which there has never been a general. How can you win a war with no one in charge?

Please know that beginning with Ronald Reagan (who would not say the word ‘AIDS’ publicly for seven years), every single
president has said nothing and done nothing, or in the case of the current president [Obama], says the right things and then doesn’t do them.

Please know that most medications for HIV/AIDS are inhumanly expensive and that government funding for the poor to obtain them is dwindling and often unavailable. *(The Normal Heart 79)*

In acknowledging HIV/AIDS as an ongoing crisis in the US and setting out a genealogy of presidential apathy in relation to the disease, Kramer attempts to offset temptations towards so-called ‘AIDS nostalgia’ and gestures towards the importance of productive public conversation surrounding the virus. However, as West concedes, ‘Kramer does not direct the audience to take any particular action and leaves it up to them how best to direct their emotional energy’ (101).

A quick Twitter search, following Gindt’s methodology, gives us some idea of the way in which such emotional energy is spent. US news anchor Don Lemon, for example, watched the show and tweeted, in a similar tone to that employed by Gindt’s Swedish Twitter subjects, ‘What an incredible show & cast. so emotional. i’m dehydrated from crying so much. wow. larry was there too’ (@donlemon), while another audience member explained how ‘@thenormalheart hit my conscious with a sledgehammer and demolished me into a sobbing mess. Pls learn more about HIV/AIDS: www.aids.gov’ (@DeanneChen). By suggesting that he experienced a painful somatic reaction – dehydration – to Kramer’s play, Lemon attempts to sell himself as a model empathic agent: someone so affected by the plight of the AIDS-afflicted that he can *feel* the pain of the suffering. While he may indeed have experienced a feeling of genuine empathy, the possibility that this feeling was interpenetrated by self-promotional desires is only made more plausible by the tagging
on of ‘larry was there too.’ This phrase betrays a valorisation of celebrity consistent with hierarchical neoliberal logic, as well as the fact that as a well-known public figure himself Lemon faces a strong imperative to sell himself to an audience base. The author of the latter Tweet, meanwhile, turns attention towards their own capacity for self-betterment with a comically hyperbolic sledgehammer metaphor. The shattering of the misapplied term ‘conscious’ implies the total destruction of an aspect of their worldview that we can assume is undesirable or unenlightened, making way for cognitive reparations to make them a better person. Such hyperbolic testimonies, therefore, in their sheer ferocity and inward-looking purpose of making their authors appear virtuous, correlate with Gindt’s thesis that the revival of HIV/AIDS plays can instigate competitive displays of affect.

Another notable phenomenon I observed while searching Twitter was that audience members frequently used the platform to enlist other users to join what is often referred to as the ‘fight’ against HIV/AIDS, with one user describing the Normal Heart as ‘a searing, sad, necessary play that must be seen, as a work of art and a message that must still be heard’ (@dsrbroadway). The notion of a play being ‘necessary’ and one which ‘must be seen’ implicitly conceptualises viewing it an act of public duty; something honourable in what Kramer terms a ‘war with no general.’ Indeed, the bellicose tone Kramer employs in his letter demonstrates that the playwright has not moved on from the military metaphors employed during his activism of the 1980s. At the height of the crisis, such metaphors were employed in a way that could be seen as redolent of the language used by Gramsci to describe political struggle. Transposing the vernacular of military science on to the realm of political struggle, for example, Gramsci identified three categories under which organised resistance could fall: war of movement (or manoeuvre), war of position, and
underground warfare. War of position involves the development of a counterhegemony that wears away the common-sense principles of the dominant culture, war of movement more frontal assaults on the state, and underground warfare represents the covert preparation to go through with the former forms of political resistance (Gramsci 229). Reading *The Normal Heart* against this framework, it could be seen as playing a role in ACT UP’s war of position in that its central love story represented an attempt to enervate the homophobia endemic to the dominant culture and, by extension, galvanise support for direct action. The use of such militaristic rhetoric is not straightforwardly counterhegemonic, however, particularly when viewed in a contemporary neoliberal setting. As Susan Sontag argues in her frequently referenced *AIDS and its Metaphors*, the use of martial terminology in relation to diseases such as AIDS or cancer can be traced to the individualistic imperatives produced by capitalistic hegemony:

Where once it was the physician who waged *bella contra morbum*, the war against disease, now it’s the whole society […] Abuse of the military metaphor may be inevitable in a capitalist society, a society that increasingly restricts the scope and credibility of appeals to ethical principle, in which it is thought foolish not to subject one’s actions to the calculus of self-interest and profitability. (Sontag 10-11)

Contemporary use of the military rhetoric Kramer initially employed to fight oppressive hegemonic forces, therefore, is necessarily compromised by the ways in which such bellicosity may be quietly influenced by the self-serving impulses of everyday neoliberalism.

While there are no *concrete* conclusions to be drawn from my reading of *The Normal Heart*’s most recent major revival, it demonstrates some agreement with
Gindt’s thesis about the complicated politics of reviving early HIV/AIDS plays. The inception of widespread online communication in the first few years after the turn of the century has transformed the neoliberal subject’s possible outlets for self-expression and reflection and has changed the ways in which audiences share their experiences as cultural consumers. In this way, writing and producing theatre about HIV/AIDS in the twenty-first century necessitates careful negotiation with the affective potential of the public receiving it. The politics of affect are ever more difficult to negotiate due to everyday neoliberalism’s commodifying impetus, which, as Han posits, coerces the neoliberal subject to participate in competitive or self-serving displays of sentiment. Richard Seymour builds on this idea in *The Twittering Machine* (2019), a cautionary polemic against social media’s monetisation of users’ attention and their addictive propensities. ‘The internal politics of the medium,’ which often involves discussion of overtly political cultural products such as Kramer’s play is, Seymour argues ‘itself a politics of identity, because it compels us to dedicate more and more of our time to performing an identity […]. We can carefully brand ourselves, producing an identity as a consumable good, an attention magnet’ (100). With first-generation plays no longer actively linked to contemporary political movements as they were in the 1980s and ‘90s, their sentimental essence has become a way for users to involve themselves with social media’s (affective) internal politics and for theatre institutions to generate valuable publicity via affectively-driven online networks. As for second-generation theatre, therefore, while Therese Jones was already conceding the political limitations of first-generation HIV/AIDS theatre in 1994, describing them as ‘sentimental in tone’ and ‘assimilationist in aim’, her conception of second-generation plays as ‘defiantly postulat[ing] an alternative discourse which opposes hierarchical structures, asserts subjectivity, and challenges cultural suppression of sexuality’ (x-xi) must now be
footnoted with the caveat that their anti-sentimentalist and overtly countercultural aims have rendered them almost incompatible with today’s neoliberal political landscape. Indeed, the complexities of such incompatibility will be examined further in the next chapter.

The politically antiquated nature of first-generation theatre, however, does not mean plays of such ilk are no longer written in the twenty-first century. Take, for example, Australian playwright Tommy Murphy’s 2006 hit play, *Holding the Man*. Like a host of sentimental first-generation plays before it, *Holding the Man* tells the story of a doomed love between its protagonists – John and Tim – both of whom face a familiar trajectory featuring rapturous love, unfaithful deviations from a monogamous partnership, HIV diagnosis, reparations, and a concluding deathbed love scene. As critic Mark Shenton complained in the review of a 2010 production at London’s Trafalgar Studios, the play appears to be ‘a bit dated – we had our fill of AIDS deathbed dramas in the late eighties and early nineties, from Larry Kramer’s ground-breaking *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, to William Finn’s wonderful one-act musical *Falsettoland*’ (*Holding the Man Review*).

Similarly, in a review of the same production, a critic described his feelings of déjá vu and the sense that the play is now passé. There have been so many plays about Aids over the past 25 years that *Holding the Man* often seems stuck in a well-worn groove. Nor does it consider the way antiretroviral drugs have alleviated the problem in recent years. (Spencer)

*Holding the Man* is very much first-generational in terms of its form and scope, therefore, and its politics align closely with the ‘assimilationist’ politics Jones sets out as characteristic of the generation. This can mainly be seen in Murphy’s tacit
excoriation of non-monogamy. At the beginning of Act Two, for instance, when Tim breaks the news to John that he would like to have sex with men outside of their relationship, John exits and the stage directions state that ‘TIM fucks the nearest male ACTOR,’ (Murphy 116) a wordless parody – and thus denunciation – of what Larry Kramer has condemned as indiscriminate fucking in certain screeds against homosexual promiscuity (‘Sex and Sensibility 59). Murphy’s alignment with Kramer’s politics is further demonstrated by the similarities that can be drawn between both deathbed scenes of The Normal Heart and Holding the Man. Although Murphy’s protagonists do not have a ‘marriage’ ceremony as Kramer’s do, Tim attempts to atone for his apparent sexual ‘deviancy’ by expressing his devotion in contractual terms, telling John, ‘You can’t go without me at your side […] That’s the deal’ (Murphy 157). A priest even appears to legitimise the union while reading John’s last rites, stating ‘I entrust you to God who created you and take you from Tim’ (159). It is in this way that we might read Murphy’s play as appealing to a mainstream audience; even making concessions to a heterosexist worldview by ‘legitimating’ Tim and John’s relationship with nuptial language.

The subject of gay marriage, while often cited as the lynchpin of gay liberation in mainstream left-leaning and centrist political discourse, is frequently instantiated as an example of homonormativity, a term coined by Lisa Duggan. As Duggan states in her exploration of neoliberalism around the turn of the millennium, The Twilight of Equality?, homonormativity betrays ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’ (50). Gay proponents of homonormativity thus express a desire for subjection to neoliberal
governance and for acceptance by a ‘national mainstream,’ serving to drive ‘a rhetorical remapping of public/private boundaries designed to shrink gay public spheres, and redefine gay equality against the “civil rights agenda” and “liberationism,” as access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the “free” market, and patriotism’ (Duggan 50-51). Tim and John, therefore, by devoting themselves entirely to each other and adopting homo/heteronormative traditions, tacitly (perhaps even unknowingly) enter into a contract with the neoliberal state; domesticating themselves in a way which benefits its state apparatus and permits them access to roles in the contemporary ‘free market’.

The undoubtedly affective elements of both Murphy and Kramer’s deathbed/nuptial scenes can even be read as tools of neoliberal hegemony. As Sue-Ellen Case argues in an incisive exploration of affective performance in the context of gay marriage, the ceremonies and performative rituals surrounding same-sex marriage ‘are performances of cathecting to the state’ (17). This is particularly pertinent in the context of the couples’ final kisses, as Case traces the history of same-sex kissing from an activist act of resistance used in kiss-ins to a ‘two-person kiss of state’:

Kiss-ins were performed in public places by multiple couplings (not couples) against the state, in contrast to the marital kiss of the state-sanctioned couple, whose coupledom is warranted by the renewed status of the affective subject posed by neoliberalism. The marriage ceremony seems designed to swoon those kissers into the embrace of the state, promising the return of the exiled through state-sanctioned emotions. (17)

While, of course, such a reading risks reducing the complex nature of affect to a conduit of purely political and economic desires, the fact that the most affecting and sentimental moments of both The Normal Heart and Holding the Man occur during
climactic quasi-nuptial final scenes demonstrates both Kramer and Murphy’s desire to appeal to the dominant culture.

While the politics of both plays appear to feature similar imbrications of social conservatism and neoliberal ideology, the fact that they were written in different decades – different millennia, even – means the degree to which each is implicated within neoliberal hegemony may diverge. As Duggan has asserted, neoliberalism’s relationship to gay politics has a genealogical dimension by which the community-centric and activist days of the 1980s and early 1990s can be differentiated from the political atmosphere governing the late 1990s and early 2000s, which saw the proliferation of a ‘newly emergent “equality” politics drawn from the lesbian and gay rights movements’ that pushed for gay marriage and military service over issues traditionally addressed by broad-based progressive movements (45). While it is not erroneous to assert that Kramer’s didactic social conservatism is imbued with homonormativity, therefore, it is important to contextualise his work in relation to the timeline Duggan establishes. In many ways, Kramer’s politics was anything but assimilationist: he was a leading figure in ACT UP, for example, taking part in direct actions that tenaciously attacked the Reagan administration’s apparent indifference to escalating deaths amongst gay Americans, as well as the widespread homophobia that haunted the US at the time. While, from a contemporary standpoint, calls for monogamy and abstinence would not be the most effective or progressive measures for tackling HIV/AIDS, the life-saving treatments of today were simply not available during the mid-1980s, when Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart*. The apparent tension between Kramer’s homonormative, nuptial imperatives and his willingness to engage in countercultural activism, therefore, reflects a kind of pragmatic politics intent on saving lives rather than a politics grounded in a particular ideological system or school
of thought. Murphy’s play, however, was first staged at a time when the exigencies Kramer found himself reacting to had passed. Follow Duggan’s trajectory of growing neoliberalisation, and the veneration of monogamous practices in *Holding the Man* are revealed to be more clearly homonormative than Kramer’s. To clarify, Murphy’s motives are not activist in the sense that Kramer’s were and, as observed in Spencer’s critique, the former’s failure to address the introduction of antiretroviral agents suggests an unwillingness to disrupt the HIV redemption narrative that appears to legitimate heterosexist assimilation.

A lost (second) generation?

The popularity of first-generation HIV/AIDS plays – along with their various instances of tacit agreement with the values of homonormativity – goes some way towards explaining why their second-generational successors have received nowhere near as much critical attention and are rarely revived for the contemporary stage. Second-generation theatre, while retaining a similar urgency to its predecessor, largely resists absorption into the hetero/homonormative mainstream. Uninterested in appealing to neoliberal sensibilities through the figures of the nuptial ‘Good Gay Couple’ seen in *Holding the Man* and *The Normal Heart*, second-generation theatre uses form in subversive and creative ways to promote an anti-normative queer politics, as well as make clear both the horrors inflicted by AIDS and the inadequacies of governmental bodies in pursuing life-saving treatments. In this way, many second-generational plays can be seen to employ quasi-Brechtian dramaturgies, resisting the imperative of first-generation playwrights to encourage audience members to pity or even identify with
their central protagonists. Wendell Jones and David Stanley’s *AIDS! The Musical!* (1991), for example, is a deeply countercultural play featuring sex clubs, Radical Faeries, and new age gatherings that, as Therese Jones explains ‘represents a Brechtian restaging of reverse transcriptase: reclaiming AIDS from the heterosexual community, rescripting AIDS for the gay and lesbian community, and re-visioning that community’s response’ (xiii). In other words, it unveiled the neglectful response of the dominant culture through an apologetically queer dramaturgy featuring songs, direct audience address, and onstage protests. Other examples include Faust-inspired *Satan and Simon DeSoto* (1991) by Ted Sod, Doug Holsclaw’s *The Baddest of Boys* (1992), and James Carroll Pickett’s *Queen of Angels* (1992), all of which utilise surrealist forms to illustrate the disorientation felt by sufferers of HIV/AIDS in an heterosexist and neoliberal world that resists accommodating non-normative sexualities. Another final example, as will be explored in Chapter Two, is Tim Miller’s second-generational *My Queer Body*, which uses a subversive testimonial form akin to evangelical oratory tradition to promote a queer utopian politics. Of all the experimental and ferociously anti-neoliberal examples of second-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, however, perhaps the most subversive and widely remembered is the work of Iranian-American playwright Reza Abdoh, who died of AIDS-related causes at the age of 32.

Abdoh’s primary AIDS-related works, *Bogeyman* (1991), *The Law of Remains* (1991), and *Quotations from a Ruined City* (1993) are avant-garde hybrids of theatre and performance art described by critics as ‘Dantesque’ and ‘remorseless’ (Marowitz 100), and some ‘of the angriest theater pieces ever hurled at a New York audience’ (Holden 102). Indeed, critical reactions to Abdoh’s work often featured a similar rhetorical vigour in a (somewhat futile) attempt to put into words the experiential assault of a protean dramaturgy that at once epitomises the concoction of ‘satire, farce,
romance, slapstick, and burlesque’ constitutive of the second-generational project; a project that thrived on anti-neoliberal and queer politics, experimentalism, and polarising shock value (Jones, T. xi). In the remaining part of this chapter, therefore, I will use Abdoh’s work to demonstrate how second-generation HIV/AIDS plays became virtually unstageable after the dawn of the third millennium, exploring the ways in which untethered forms of neoliberalism and commodification foreclosed the restaging and production of these works. Whilst exhibitors of Abdoh’s films have asserted that the playwright expressed a desire for his plays not to be restaged (KW Institute for Contemporary Art), I argue that the widespread neglect of his work by scholars and artists despite the existence of extensive filmed versions of his productions is symptomatic of the turn away from second-generation theatre more broadly.

One of the most visually patent elements manifest within Abdoh’s dramaturgy is its spatio-temporal exposition of the destructive nature of neoliberal society in the US. Take, for example, the set of the 1991 production of Bogeyman at the Los Angeles Theatre Centre, which depicted a multi-storied cross section of an LA apartment building. For the duration of the play, each of the exposed rooms accommodates short, seemingly disparate dramatic scenes that nevertheless form a loose narrative illustrating a young man’s physical deterioration from AIDS, and his mother’s, father’s and lover’s reactions to it. At the same time, various screens adorn the set, depicting similarly disparate events at select moments throughout the play. Such a setup is exemplary of a formal device that Guy Zimmerman terms ‘bricolage.’ Bricolage ‘underscore[s] the post-punk heterogeneity and discontinuity of Abdoh’s fast-paced collage aesthetic, which Marvin Carlson described as a “constant mixture of text, music, movement, video, film, and visual spectacle […] moving so rapidly as to defy
analysis, even comprehension” (Zimmerman 62). Carlson’s argument that Abdoh’s work defies analysis is convincing insofar as the range of sexually explicit and spectacularly violent acts that take place within the rooms and on-screen – from sadomasochism to genital dismemberment to repeated bomb threats – are in some cases too visceral or shocking to warrant critical dissection. Indeed, they exploit the audience’s propensity for instinctive disgust, excitement or even titillation with a force so powerful it is difficult to turn away. As Elinor Fuchs noted of Abdoh’s Quotations from a Ruined City, the playwright’s work ‘wants witnesses, not spectators’ (108), thereby foreclosing any possible agency the audience may have over the scenes they observe: spectating suggests considered viewing, while witnessing suggests forced exposure.

It is in this way that the spatial politics of Abdoh’s stage become clear. With its multi-storied rooms filling the length and height of the stage, and surrounding television screens that loop violent and pornographic images, Abdoh is able to saturate the stage with individual scenes of horror. As such, any audience member potentially troubled by the violence onstage has nowhere to avert their eyes (apart from towards their fellow theatregoers, who are also implicated in watching the scenes). As Gautam Dasgupta explains, this technique can be attributed to Abdoh’s desire to confront audiences with the painful realities of those whom society commonly disregards or shuns such as the homosexuals; the HIV/AIDS-infected; the sex workers; the poor:

What Abdoh’s theatre gives us is, in a sense, unwritable, or unspeakable, for it is, paradoxically, the ones unspoken for, those without a language, who are given a voice in his work. And these voices, unheard of within the dominant social framework or, when audible, painfully attenuated within the prevailing social, political,
economic, and linguistic construct, seek out new models of being in the world or in a culture from which they are alienated. (21)

At its most fundamental level, therefore, the spatial elements of Adboh’s bricolage forcibly and unequivocally communicate to its audiences the atrocity and agony inflicted on marginalised members of society (such as AIDS patients) by inert American governance. This communicative technique transcends the limitations of the spoken word as ‘the characters in Abdoh’s universe have access to a multiplicity of languages, mediated and unmediated – private self and public persona, body and mind, gesture and voice, image and narration, the vocabulary of “high” and “low” culture, text, context, and subtext’ (Dasgupta 21). In utter contrast to the ways in which first-generation AIDS plays pander to a mainstream heteronorm by valorising nuptial monogamy and omitting the realities of queer sex, Abdoh’s work exemplifies the politically antagonistic bent of second-generation theatre. Sex is at the forefront of Bogeyman, generating an overtly sensual and haptic dramaturgy that pays no heed to the audience as consumers. Instead, those seated in the auditorium are conceived as the inevitable subjects of a neoliberal culture that blinds them to the sufferings of society’s economic and social underclass, with Abdoh’s dramaturgy acting as a kind of visceral and excruciating antidote. As David Román noted in his review of Bogeyman’s production in Los Angeles, ‘the sold-out run did not translate to full enthusiasm as countless subscribers walked out within the first ten minutes and missed, unfortunately, the castration-by-chainsaw scene’ (‘Bogeyman Review’ 396). Clearly, then, Abdoh’s relationship with his audiences was complex: he did not perceive them as consumers to satisfy in the way often demanded of commercial theatre, but as potential antagonists to undermine in America’s ongoing culture wars.
The fact that the unique language of Abdoh’s dramaturgy is so reliant on shockingly visceral aesthetics and the physicality of its actors, and that, as Alyson Campbell notes, ‘the composition of the performance text works on the spectator far beyond the reach of the signifying qualities of the spoken text’ could go some way towards explaining why there is scant scholarly work on Abdoh’s theatrical output (‘From Bogeyman to Bison’ 201). Indeed, the conventions of theatre scholarship tend to ground analysis of a play’s speech and formal elements in its playtext, rendering Abdoh’s sketchy and largely unpublished body of written texts a difficult medium through which to weave rich and complex analysis. Of the plays that have been published, in fact, such as The Law of Remains, Abdoh expresses an aversion to the traditional playtext in his notes, stating that

In my written texts for theater I replace characters’ names with the names of the people who are performing the roles. In my view this creates a more objective context. I am not so interested in how the actors “play act” their roles but rather how they live them onstage. (11)

This antipathy towards orthodox publishing practices is, perhaps, related to Abdoh’s request that his plays were not to be reproduced after his death, but instead concretised in a filmic format. That his actors were conceived as ‘living’ their roles suggests an inextricable relation between actor and onstage character that consciously blurs the boundaries between the diegetic space of the stage and the real world beyond it. Combined with the determinedly political content of Abdoh’s plays, this heightened the feelings of implication or involvement experienced by audience members, pushing

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3 Only The Law of Remains (1996), Quotations from a Ruined City (1995) and Tight Right White (1994) have been published in full. However, video recordings of original performances are available online on the professional Vimeo account of video artist Adam Soch: https://vimeo.com/adamsoch
his work towards the realm of oppositional activism and decidedly away from the ‘war of position’ tactics employed in Kramer’s play. With the role of the spectator-as-consumer destabilised, Abdoh’s works were shielded from the kinds of commodification they actively railed against.

Fortunately, despite the obvious hurdles scholars face when analysing Abdoh’s plays, Zimmerman has risen to the difficult challenge of articulating the symbolic power of the playwright’s bricolage dramaturgy, arguing that certain meanings immanent within his signature style can be gleaned through the lens of political economy. He explains that

Abdoh’s bricolage articulates a mode of resistance to a core dynamic of neoliberalism in which the spatial conquest of industrial capitalism is transformed into a temporal form of capture. In this state of being […] every minute of every day is devoted to the demands of competition and self-marketing, and the subject is governed by a sense of time as a rigidly linear progression toward the binary destinations of success or failure.

(62-3)

Zimmerman argues that the anti-neoliberal thrust of Abdoh’s oeuvre is discernible in more than simply its antagonism of mainstream sensibilities. Rather, neoliberal ideology is antithetical to the very structure of his plays and their heterotemporality, which sees several seemingly unrelated events taking place onstage at once. Zimmerman sees neoliberalism as embodying a unitary temporality that reflects a restrictive drive to coerce its subjects into focusing their efforts into lucrative production: Abdoh’s fractured and simultaneously occurring scenes that make up his bricolage, therefore, operate metaphorically as counterforces to the destructive nature of a radically unbounded market. This is because the
linear flow of time is central to the neoliberal strategy of control or capture, which Abdoh counters through the nomadicism of his discontinuous bricolage, which constantly demands from the audience disruptive, in-the-moment revaluations of what is being presented. (Zimmerman 71)

If, as the old proverb goes, time is money, representing a resource that can be put towards the pursuit of profit, then scrambling time in front of audience members forces them to question the ‘common-sense’ logic of rapacious neoliberal capitalism. It confronts them with questions about the space and time of the contemporary economic order in a way that reveals the political power of live performance.

A good example of the way in which the spatio-temporal disruption characteristic of Abdoh’s dramaturgy illuminates the destructive nature of contemporary economic affairs is the manner in which one of Bogeyman’s central figures occupies the stage: a grotesque patriarch who spouts offensive racial epithets and claims to be the ‘chairman of a pharmaceutical conglomerate’ (‘Bogeyman – Los Angeles’ 00:20:00). Made up to appear sweaty and absurdly florid, patting an artificially stuffed belly that protrudes so far that it cannot be mistaken for anything other than caricature, the figure of the pharmaceutical chairman represents the greedy, nefarious nature of so-called Big Pharma and the neoliberal American healthcare system. The play’s hysterical mother character, meanwhile, regularly repeats ‘prescribe something so I can fall asleep’ (‘Bogeyman – Los Angeles’ 00:23:30–40), demonstrating her unwavering reliance on a system that capitalises on addiction and suffering, as well as a critique of the nuclear familial structures vaunted by first-generation HIV/AIDS plays. The scene reaches its apogee when a writhing, lonely and neglected AIDS patient appears onstage, providing a visceral representation of the US medical establishment’s inaction during the height of the crisis and, more tacitly, the wider gamut of oppressive structures perpetuated by
everyday neoliberalism. While these scenes are only brief and could even go unnoticed amongst the play’s frenetically busy and cacophonous bricolage, their political message is reinforced by Abdo’s bestowing a substantial amount of stage time and space on the character of the pharmaceutical chairman. For several minutes, the character is liberated from the enclosed rooms of the on-stage apartment, walking freely across the entirety of the front section of the stage. He utterly monopolises the space while reeling off a semi-comprehensible rant that includes phrases such as ‘the end is near,’ ‘I’m gonna blow all you cocksuckers up,’ and ‘you are all gonna die’ (‘Bogeyman – Los Angeles’ 00:25:35-00:26:26), words reminiscent of evangelical screeds of the American Christian Right during the 1980s and ‘90s. The rant also includes the mention of a so-called ‘National Health Act Amendment,’ which promises to sterilise, maim and abuse those of certain races or sexual orientations, or with certain diseases, as well as kill off those without health insurance, a clear allusion to the ways in which the US’s privatised healthcare system renders poorer, marginalised people more vulnerable to sickness and death (‘Bogeyman – Los Angeles’ 00:29:32).

The outrageously violent and fascistic form of capitalism described here combined with the markedly homotemporal nature of his monologue, which is for the most part uninterrupted and not in keeping with Abdo’s bricolage style, demonstrates the nefarious, all-consuming nature of contemporary neoliberal ideology in America, as well as its relationship with certain strata of the country’s Christian Right. The fictional health act described by the pharmaceutical boss, for example, is reflective of the markedly neoliberal setup of the contemporary American healthcare system and its profit-driven fundamentals. Carolyn Hughes Tuohy offers a good overview of this system and its relationship with entrepreneurialism, noting that, during the 1980s in particular, the development of financial resources for healthcare delivery was largely
left in the hands of US private markets following policy changes in the 1960s (125).

In the decade running up to the first performance of *Bogeyman*, therefore,

the logic of entrepreneurialism and the logic of professionalism [within the healthcare sector] began to drive in different directions. Entrepreneurialism dictated that unit costs be minimized; professionalism drove toward a less constrained allocation of resources in individual cases. As these logics diverged, the role of entrepreneur came increasingly to be played by a set of actors once relegated to a relatively minor role in the health care arena: for-profit, particularly investor-owned, firms. (Tuohy 125)

Such unbounded privatisation of the sector resulted in pricing battles between pharmaceutical firms and those suffering from AIDS. Drugs company Burroughs Wellcome, for example, attracted scandal in the late 1980s after pricing cutting-edge therapy azidothymidine (AZT) at a level that made it one of the most expensive drugs ever sold.\(^4\) To emphasise the destructive nature of such a healthcare system, which brazenly favours the lives and well-being of the rich, *Bogeyman*’s pharmaceutical chairman stands outside of the apartment block while delivering his speech. In this way, he has the privilege of looking at the world (or, at least, the diegesis of the play) in its entirety, addressing other characters who can see him but not each other. This affords him a sort of power with which he can manipulate and control the subjugated characters of the play, dictating which spaces they are allowed to occupy and controlling the information they are exposed to. The character of the pharmaceutical chairman, then, is a physically rendered metaphor for the power of a market-driven society to oppress its poorer or less ‘desirable’ members. For AIDS sufferers, whose

\(^4\) The company charged around $8,000 per year’s supply for one patient (Chase).
lives were already devalued by dint of stigma and widespread homophobia, the option to receive treatment lay solely with the moneyed.

In this way, then, Abdoh employed on-stage violence to depict the increasingly destructive force of neoliberalism in America as well as the visceral horrors of AIDS. As Alyson Campbell explains, in ‘his experiential, queer dramaturgy, Abdoh staged gay HIV/AIDS subjectivities without “normalizing,” without “degaying,” and without apology,’ something redolent of a wider, avant-garde sensibility amongst artists addressing HIV/AIDS in the 1990s (‘From Bogeyman to Bison’ 202). Writing in the 1980s, Raymond Williams noted that the avant-garde’s etymological link to the word ‘vanguard’ suggests something of its aims and motivations. The military metaphor, he argues, demonstrates the ways in which it ‘saw itself as the breakthrough to the future: its members were not the bearers of a progress already repetitiously defined, but the militants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity’ (‘The Politics of the Avant-Garde’ 51). Although Williams was writing about earlier forms of avant-garde work, this militarism appears to align with Abdoh’s project in quite a direct sense, with Bogeyman’s ultra-violent bricolage suggesting that, as critic, director and playwright Charles Marowitz put it,

No matter how much we distract ourselves from the fact, the AIDS epidemic is an inescapable reality, and the superstitious desire to relegate it to one segment of the population cannot prevent us from stumbling over the corpses or getting the stench of deadly tumescence in our nostrils. (100)

AIDS, therefore, represented a kind of battlefield for Abdoh, his violent dramaturgy embodying the fight against neoliberalist oppression and doubling up as a consciousness-raising, political intervention. As John Bell noted in 1995, it was such
political exigencies that gave rise to renewed avant-gardist forms of theatre during the epidemic, ‘just as the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the rise of fascism in the 1930s, and the horrors of World War I in the teens had engendered avantgarde political theatre throughout [the twentieth] century’ (36).

Of the artists creating avant-gardist HIV/AIDS work in the early 1990s, then, many produced visceral and shocking depictions of violence and death, taking the militaristic pragmatism initially employed by Kramer deeper into the realms of a more oppositional, subversive counterculture. Other than Abdoh’s work, theatrical examples of this include Holsclaw’s farce The Baddest of Boys (1992), in which dying café owner Perry and his colleagues plan (or, in Perry’s case, hallucinate) the ways in which they can put him out of his misery with a range of brutal tools including microwave radiation, a shotgun, a blowtorch, or carbon monoxide. In Jones’ and Stanley’s AIDS! The Musical! (1991), on the other hand, in a more obviously militaristic vein, characters describe their wishes to shoot George H. W. Bush and sings songs with refrains such as ‘Momma, I need a gun for my birthday’ (Jones, W. and Stanley 230). In fact, the notion of killing or torturing Republican politicians became somewhat of a trope in countercultural HIV/AIDS art in the early 1990s, with HIV-positive gay men often figured as freedom-fighting insurgents. Gregg Araki’s controversial film The Living End (1992), for example, tells the story of a couple of HIV-positive lovers who embark on a road trip inspired by the motto ‘Fuck everything’, committing murder and theft in their wake, as well as plotting to inject George H. W. Bush with a vial of their infected blood. It attracted plenty of critical ire from reviewers on release for its supposed nihilism and explicit depiction of gay male sex, with one reviewer condemning it as ‘not for just everyone, not even lesbians’ and citing its clear stylistic indebtedness to avant-garde cineastes such as Jean Luc Godard and Andy Warhol as
evidence of its abject pretentiousness (Kempley). Of course, offending the sensibilities of the dominant culture in this way represented a significant component of the film’s political project, with the violence at the heart of the film, as in Abdoh’s plays, designed to rally a heightened awareness of the political battle in which AIDS victims were engaged and, indeed, energise viewers to join their ranks, at least in solidarity. A final example, beyond the worlds of film and theatre, is James Robert Baker’s novel *Tim and Pete* (1996), which extended the art-as-political-terrorism trope into the literary landscape, telling the story of a group of gay anarchist artists who fantasise and ultimately plot to murder an array of high-profile Republicans such as Nancy Reagan. As Pete, one of the eponymous protagonists puts it,

I’d strangle her. That would be the most satisfying. To just choke the fuck out of her till her face turned red and her tongue lopped out. Then tear off her head, just twist it right off, and throw it through the stained-glass window like a stinking sack of shit.

(Baker 205)

Pete blurs the line between ironical fantasy and incitement in the excessively violent description evidenced here and throughout much of the novel, its scatological references and profanity inflecting the novel’s politics with dark comedy that resonated with the humour of second-generation plays and pushed HIV/AIDS art into some of its most anarchistic, anti-assimilationist realms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the staunchly oppositional nature of queer avant-gardism and militantly anti-neoliberal HIV/AIDS artwork of the 1990s was not particularly saleable, something which may explain why Abdoh’s work – and second-generation plays more generally – are rarely reproduced for the contemporary stage and tend not to be critically embraced like those of the first generation. As the 1990s transitioned
into the new millennium and neoliberalism became ever more hegemonic, pessimism surrounding the increasing marketisation of theatre and the demise of experimentalism started to emerge amongst theatre scholars and practitioners. This was perhaps best exemplified by the publication of a volume of essays entitled *Theatre in crisis? Performance manifestos for a new century* (2003) edited by Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich. In it, the manifestos of various contributors draw links between the increasingly unadulterated forms of neoliberalism that characterise the new century and a marked lack of innovation or radicalism within the theatre sector, with many blaming a lack of public funding and shifting audience expectations for such adverse developments. In the collection’s opening manifesto, for example, Svich bemoans, the fact that

Lack of funds, resources, and support for, especially, experimental artists has forced the makers of art to doubt their very ‘usefulness’ in society. In the US, for example, the emphasis on box-office receipts, entertainment ‘value’, and ‘marketable content’ has caused some artists to not only question their life’s work, but to stop working altogether. (17)

As such, Svich notes, there was a stark return to naturalism around the turn of the millennium as theatres and playwrights strived to produce the most marketable, easily consumable plays. Theatre director Roberta Levitow’s manifesto strikes a similarly mournful note, locating the demise of avant-garde or experimental forms of theatre around the time of Reagan’s inauguration, when the craft of her theatre-making contemporaries became less sustainable:

Funding evaporated but we carried on performing. To surprisingly fewer and fewer of our peers. Where had all the young radicals gone? Into business or family maintenance, I’m sure. Meanwhile,
our parents stayed the course, at those dull big theatres we abhorred. And those dull big theatres hired us to do our somewhat less radical work for them. (28)

Again, a new economic ‘common sense’ was pushing theatre-makers out of the sector, dampening their creativity and experimental verve.

Of course, it is easy to see how Svich’s and Levitov’s manifestos could be accused of a certain kind of nostalgia in regards to experimental forms of expression, with the latter even describing her gatherings of ‘Social Avant-Garde’ theatre-makers in the 1960s as ‘like church, the church of the politically and socially impassioned. Or at least that’s how I like to remember it’ (Levitow 28). As James M. Harding has noted, such sugar-coated descriptions of theatre’s past often represent the mourning of just one form of avant-garde expression. Many theatre scholars posit the particular for the universal, he argues, turning ‘a blind eye to the evolving versatility of the many that characterizes the avantgardes of the past and the present and arguably the future as well’ (161). However, whilst this nostalgic trap may be seductive, with various scholars included in Svich’s volume sometimes appearing to defeatedly eulogise theatre, much incisive academic work covering the political economy of theatre has identified a marked decline in experimental forms over the past few decades. Liz Tomlin, for example, in a study of vanguard performance and the marketplace, argues that what were once considered avant-garde dramaturgies have been commodified, and therefore de-radicalised, by virtue of the neoliberalisation of several interlinked institutions including universities, theatres and workshop laboratories. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s theories surrounding ‘hierarchies of consecration’ disseminated in his *Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Tomlin explains that the commodification of the academy (specifically in the UK, but applicable across the West), caused by rising
tuition costs and the marketing of degrees as economic commodities, has affected how and what kinds of artistic work is ‘consecrated’ – legitimised, valued or canonised – within the cultural sphere, and therefore what kind of plays are likely to be reproduced. As Tomlin argues, if we are to accept Bourdieu’s logic of consecration, scholars’ roles as ‘ultimate arbiters of canonization’ and ‘facilitators of vanguard practice’ have been compromised by the market imperatives of the late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century academy (Acts and Apparitions 269). Pressure on humanities departments to offer “skills” that can help support, not challenge, the neoliberal consensus of our time’ has accordingly dampened the production of plays that challenge this consensus (Acts and Apparitions 272). On a wider scale, then, Tomlin argues,

[the theatrical market], being fundamentally risk-averse, is led by work already on its way to consecration, so it will be looking for work that offers a novel dimension to that existing and proven “brand,” rather than work seeking to challenge the very predicates of that which has proved it can earn consecrated status and subsequent market success [...] Anything genuinely challenging to the “prevailing modes of thought,” in other words anything that might historically have constituted the next generation of avant-garde practice, will be rejected by the market as it represents a threat to the predicates of the existing marketplace and those who currently benefit from it. (Acts and Apparitions 277)

It could be argued, then, that Bogeyman, along with countless other second-generational plays, failed to be consecrated by arbiters of vanguard HIV/AIDS theatre, or indeed theatre more generally, as it broke away from the ‘brand’ already established by the first generation. It neither followed activist conventions established by progenitors of AIDS theatre such as Larry Kramer, nor heeded the pattern of
contemporary avant-gardism which had to offer at least some degree of cogent meaning to be deemed consumable by a theatregoing public.

Abdoh’s utter refusal to submit to market imperatives, then, is exemplary of the subversive queerness of second-generational HIV/AIDS theatre. As he explained in an interview with Thomas Leabhart shortly before the former’s death, the trick to artistic integrity is

\[
\text{to break one’s own rules so one does not become a consumer product, a prisoner of one’s own conventions. Is it worthwhile to attempt to create a work that remains religious, a work that links one to the higher aspects of one’s self? That effort is worthwhile, whether it is successful or not. (qtd. in Leabhart 39)}
\]

Abdoh’s failure to remain marketable in the contemporary theatrical economy was, therefore, in some ways by design – a product of his anti-neoliberal stance and a political statement in itself. Indeed, there is an apparent knowingness detectable within Abdoh’s Bogeyman that the play was destined to be ephemeral, largely forgotten by the theatrical mainstream and historicised within the arcane annals of academe. As Zimmerman explains, the inborn experimentalism of Abdoh’s work intentionally precludes the further absorption of his plays into the market economy of the theatre world because, during the 1990s, the apparently relentless innovation of the avant-garde […] only anticipated the transformation of capitalism from its bourgeois, rationalist phase into its Dionysian neoliberal phase. Recognizing this development, Abdoh located within his own experience of impending mortality a vantage point by which to examine the veracity of neoliberalism’s Dionysian claims. (74)
By describing the neoliberal trends Abdoh identifies as Dionysian, Zimmerman introduces the idea that the 1990s were a time during which the free market largely unshackled itself from the residual rationalities and welfare concessions of Fordism. Indeed, the essence of the Greek god Dionysus – the god of wine-making, madness, ritual ecstasy and unrestrained consumption – serves as an apt metaphor for both the wildness of Abdoh’s dramaturgy and what the playwright identified as an escalation of neoliberalism during the 1990s, the logic of which became deliriously shackled to competition and growth, turning corporations into quasi-autonomous entities. In this way, Abdoh hit upon one of the many paradoxes of neoliberalism that have plagued its proponents for decades. Despite neoliberalism’s conception of society as made up of disparate, autonomous market entities in a transactional system in which art, for example, can be freely traded, the autonomy of the artist to produce vanguard or counterhegemonic work is necessarily constrained. As Tomlin argues, ‘[t]he more the avant-gardes sought structures and practices to challenge the commodification of art, the more they seemed destined to merely advance such rules into territory without any detriment to the underlying economic structures’, a cumulative pattern that necessarily chips away at the potential for innovation with the institution of theatre (Acts and Apparitions 267). In this way, then, Bogeyman presaged the supposed ‘crisis of theatre’ theorised within Delgado and Svich’s pessimistic volume, at least as far as HIV/AIDS theatre was concerned. While, as will be explored in subsequent chapters, such pessimism was not necessarily called for (the third generation does, in fact, contain flashes of vanguard innovation) the years leading up to the millennium nurtured a uniquely experimental and counterhegemonic collection of plays, the production of which was catalysed by AIDS’s urgent shadow of death.
After Abdoh: The transition from second- to third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre

Pondering what was next for HIV/AIDS theatre in 1997, Noreen Barnes-McLain stated:

> The second generation of AIDS works have rebelled against realism, and assumed the forms of farce, surrealism and the fantastic in tackling the theme of living with and dying of AIDS. And beyond? Perhaps there is a third wave, that has assumed a much more positive outlook, which we witness (in part) with characters such as Jeffrey, the title character in Paul Rudnick’s comic view of negotiating gay sexuality in the 1990s, and Buzz in Terrance [sic] McNally’s *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (119)

The idea that the next generation of playwrights might focus on developing a ‘more positive outlook’ in relation to HIV/AIDS illustrates wider beliefs that the introduction of anti-retroviral combination drugs signalled new forms of freedom or opportunities for the gay community. A year before Barnes-McLain’s supposition was published, for example, conservative gay commentator Andrew Sullivan infamously declared an end to the epidemic in a piece for *The New York Times* entitled ‘When Plagues End’, miserably underestimating the extent to which HIV/AIDS would continue to affect millions of people in the US, the West and indeed the world. While the introduction of life-prolonging drugs in the mid-1990s was an immensely important development in the history of HIV/AIDS medicine, the notion that the virus’s attendant stigma, as well as the monetary, mental and physical toll it had on the infected would dissipate in turn was highly quixotic. In opposition to Barnes-McLain’s identification of playwright Paul Rudnick as a comedic outlier from his contemporaries, I will argue in Chapter Two that his particular brand of campy, somewhat vaudevillian humour was in fact subversively rebellious against hetero/homonormative societal structures with
a queerness characteristic of the second generation. As such, second-generational theatre continued to be produced after 1994 up until the turn of the century, much of it imbued with millenarian themes and a strong emphasis on the ways in which a millennial form of free market utopianism affected the lives of those living with HIV/AIDS in the 1990s. The artistic output of this generation was not halted by lifesaving therapies, therefore, but ebbed away as a distinctly millennial and intense neoliberalisation of culture took hold in the West.

What came next, then, and what will be examined in Chapters Three, Four, and Five of this study is what I conceptualise as the third generation of HIV/AIDS theatre. Breaking away from the clear assimilation-vs-opposition binary set out by the first and second generations, this newer collection of plays and playwrights was faced with a quite different political landscape from its forebears. Of course, the introduction of life-saving HIV treatments meant that post-2000 plays addressing the virus lacked the mortal exigencies that drove the production of earlier works. This was combined, however, with the fact that neoliberal hegemony continued to exert oppressive forces on the queer and HIV-positive and, worst of all, had been more securely established, reducing the scope for oppositional dramaturgies. It is worth noting at this point that I am wary of painting the supposed radicalism of Jones’s second-generational theatre in a nostalgic light. Indeed, one of the pitfalls of her original thesis was its rigid definition of second-generation theatre that failed to consider the full scope of oppressions faced by HIV-positive people in the early 1990s. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, for example, has been highly critical of Jones’s remarks that the gallows humour of second-generation theatre is a politically subversive way of coping with AIDS, arguing that gay, white theater on AIDS […] can afford to laugh in the 1990s; these people have learned how to cope and survive through camp
and irony. Nevertheless, to what extent is class an important factor
shaping [their] perspectives and philosophies of life? (130)

While the content and humour of second-generational theatre may provide an effective
critique of the structural inequalities facing gay men in the 1990s, its esotericism (also
noted by Graff) and limited representation of HIV sufferers beyond particular
constituencies inadvertently perpetuate forms of exclusion and elitism that any robust
anti-neoliberal project would hope to oppose. Generally speaking, therefore, I claim a
critical distance from Jones’s thesis, despite finding its framework very useful for
tracking the formal and thematic developments within the HIV/AIDS genre. As
readers will see, rather than championing one specific generation for its dramaturgical
innovativeness as Jones did, this study will uncover the ways in which all three
generations have contained elements of the dominant, residual and emergent as
Williams would have it, grappling with the complex ways in which neoliberal
capitalism has both served and, to a much greater extent, oppressed, the queer and
HIV-positive since the dawn of the epidemic.
Chapter 2: ‘History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches’: Chiliastic neoliberalism in pre-millennial HIV/AIDS plays

During the period between the première of *Angels in America* and the inauguration of a new, third generation of HIV/AIDS theatre attuned to twenty-first-century life, a number of second-generation playwrights went about staging works preoccupied with exploring the possible links between the emergence of HIV and the dawning of a new millennium. In many ways, *Angels* could be seen as the progenitor of this trend, obsessed as its characters are with the movement of time and the fate of a US ravaged not only by a new disease, but the culture wars that deeply divided its citizenry. As the spectral Ethel Rosenberg states in one of her most resonant lines, ‘History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches,’ (Kushner 118) at once providing a title for the play’s first part and subtly alluding to one of Kushner’s significant theoretical inspirations: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. This essay, which Benjamin penned in 1940 whilst living under the serious threat of capture by Nazi forces, rejects historicist notions of linear progress, invoking the image of Paul Klee’s painting ‘Angelus Novus’ to make a case for reconsidering how we think about the past in relation to the present and its politics. Kushner’s Angel, with her musings on the nature of time and humanity’s progress, represents an obvious allusion to Benjamin’s description of the Angel in Klee’s painting, whose ‘face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet’ (Benjamin 249). Writing as he often did in Western Marxist terms, Benjamin figured the job of the historical materialist to identify ‘the signs of a Messianic cessation of happening, or,
put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes
cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of
history’ and in so doing ‘blast open the continuum of history’ (254). Historical
moments must not be consigned to a timeline and thus considered irrelevant to the
present moment, but should remain in dialectical tension with current and future-
oriented politics. Whilst Benjamin refers here, of course, to the need to reconsider a
kind of bourgeois historicism in the struggle against fascism, Kushner repurposes this
argument to suit 1980s America. The AIDS crisis on which Kushner’s play centres
represents the ‘revolutionary chance’ Benjamin identifies, evidenced, in part, by the
coming of the era-fracturing millennium that Ethel presages. As Charles McNulty
notes,

Surveying five years of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, the
playwright casts a backward glance on America’s domestic strife,
and with it something unexpected flickers into view – the
revolutionary chance to blast open the oppressive continuum of
history and steer clear into the next millennium. (‘Kushner’s
Theses on the Philosophy of History’ 85)

Optimistic as this sounds, however, the play does not offer up any simple utopian
solutions to the rapacious neoliberalism that has compounded the epidemic. Just as
Benjamin warns against the pitfalls of historicism, the flicker of hope that McNulty
identifies must be reckoned with in the wider context of a country brimming with
forms of millenarian thought grounded in simplistic, often erroneous accounts of
America’s history. To reckon with these notions, the characters in Kushner’s play are
compelled to engage in often lengthy dialectical discussions with each other,
excavating the ghosts of America’s political past to undermine the country’s pockets
of fervid millenarianism that accompanied the run-up to the twenty-first century.
By focusing heavily on the symbolic weight of the millennium in this way, *Angels* was consonant with a broad and transnational cultural movement that encouraged people to theorise how the year 2000 might represent a junctural moment in human history; as Fernando Coronil notes, ‘the end of a millennium is a time that invites speculations about the future as well as reckonings with the past’ (63), a nod, perhaps, to a Benjaminian conception of history. Millenarianism, which can broadly be described as the politically or religiously motivated belief in an imminent and ground-breaking societal transformation, played a relatively small but robust part of this cultural reckoning in the US. Here, apocalyptic forms of millenarianism were weaponised by the Christian Right during the culture wars of the Reagan years, members of which figured AIDS as a plague sent by God to punish same-sex relations. Such rhetoric allowed parochial groups to extend their influence out to governmental realms by promoting so-called neoconservative values in a way that fortified some of the profoundly Americentric ‘common sense’ notions already endorsed by an ever-strengthening neoliberal hegemony.

This unspoken coalition existed despite the many opposing rationalisms which comprise neoliberalism and neoconservatism. To clarify, neoconservatism is a political rationality based on moralism and family and religious values, stemming from a variety of interest groups, most notably evangelical Christians. Many of its central tenets call for the patriotic return to an imagined past of a ‘great America’ characterised by family values, beliefs in frugal living, and leanings towards isolationism. Of course, such desires for asceticism and moralistic values seem to directly counter the growth-driven spirit of neoliberalism. As noted by Wendy Brown in her essay ‘American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization’,
the rich get richer dimensions of every aspect of neoliberalism run counter to neoconservatism’s necessary reliance on a working-and lower-middle-class populist base, and especially its cultivation of a traditional masculinity and family structure undercut by falling real wages and depleted infrastructures and social services. (‘American Nightmare’ 699)

However, Brown argues, state powers in America have traditionally thrived on rendering both rationalisms compatible through the hegemonisation of de-democratising and statist forms of ‘common sense’. The wealth of America relative to other countries, for example, is figured by neocons as a part of its greatness […] hence an appropriate element of patriotic attachment. This renders anti-American any resentment of the rich, reasoning that also neutralizes anger over a deteriorating standard of existence for a working class content, in Thomas Frank’s words, “to be underpaid and overweight” as long as it is also cooed to by the party of the rich as the “real America.” (‘American Nightmare’ 701).

This example demonstrates the rhetorically elastic nature of ‘common sense’ notions. The idea that wealth is somehow an unquestionably positive force grates against a neoconservative emphasis on asceticism and neighbourliness derived primarily from forms of religious doctrine. That neoconservatives accommodated such neoliberal individualism anyway is evidence of a willingness to compromise certain principles to prioritise a kind of rightward Americentrism.

When the AIDS crisis took hold, proponents of both neoconservativism and neoliberalism joined forces to demonise gay people for their own expedient political ends. Homonormativity had not yet become hegemonic, so heterosexual coupling and nuclear familial relations were endorsed in a way that sated neoconservative beliefs in
regulatory moralism whilst simultaneously feeding the neoliberal desire for unbridled growth, conceptualising the traditional family unit as one of the most effective tools with which to accumulate capital. This chapter examines how creators of HIV/AIDS theatre confronted this emphatically homophobic pre-millennial moment, focusing specifically on the US and its complicated relationship with the intersecting phenomena of millenarianism, neoliberalism and the conservative Religious Right. I argue that the connections between religious doctrine and the emergence of everyday neoliberal thought are closely knit in a way that aligns with Gramscian notions of how ‘common sense’ is concretised. As Gramsci specifies in the *Notebooks*, ‘religion is an element of fragmented common sense’ that colludes with other ideas from the realms of ideology, folklore, and superstition to generate ideas that appear natural, eternal and immune to change (325). In fact, ‘[t]he principal elements of common sense are provided by religion, and consequently the relationship between common sense and religion is much more intimate than that between common sense and the philosophical systems of the intellectuals’ (Gramsci 420). Enlightened by the first-hand experience of vilification by neoliberal and neoconservative ideologues, then, a number of second-generation HIV/AIDS playwrights used the stage as a tool to understand and, by extension, undermine, the underlying religious beliefs and common-sense rationalisms that converged to generate this distinctly millennial phenomenon.

**Intersecting forms of millenarianism in *Angels in America***

*Angels* is a good foundation on which to build an analysis of millenarian HIV/AIDS plays due to its sustained engagement with intersecting religious and political issues.
Most of the dialogue surrounding the upcoming millennium in *Angels* takes on an apocalyptic or millenarian flavour, particularly in the discourse between Prior and the Angel. Her frequent visitations incite within Prior a chiliastic fervour, leading him to believe he has ‘seen the end of things’ (Kushner 176). The idea that AIDS signalled some form of apocalypse was popular among certain echelons of American society during the crisis years, particularly those of an evangelical persuasion. As Thomas L. Long explains in a monograph exploring AIDS and apocalypticism in pre-millennial America:

> The rhetoric of American religious conservatives in the late 1970s – most visibly the political action group “Moral Majority” and television evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell – had already constructed homosexuality itself as a contagious disease and as an apocalyptic signifier, a sign of the “end times.” During the first AIDS decade, the coincidence of male homosexuality with a hideously fatal infectious agent intensified this apocalyptic rhetoric, not only among Christian fundamentalists but also within those groups most affected by AIDS. (2)

As Long goes on to explain, the trope of the AIDS-driven apocalypse was quickly appropriated by cultural workers within, or sympathetic to, HIV/AIDS-affected constituencies in the US as a mode of political resistance. This was particularly true of the gay community, many of whose artists and playwrights were unafraid of interrogating and subverting apocalyptic rhetoric, and *Angels* is exemplary of this trend.

Prior’s prophetic mission, for example, is a means through which to investigate the meaning of progress on both political and eschatological levels, deconstructing traditional Christian millenarian ideas from an agnostic perspective. As Stanton B. Garner explains in an essay exploring the millenarianism of *Angels*, ‘the play displays
an anti-apocalyptic willingness to contemplate uncertain outcomes. It also explores the willingness to continue living beyond the undeniable certainties of death and the end-time narrative of AIDS’ (178). In this way, Kushner rebukes the notion of AIDS as a harbinger of apocalyptic retribution against homosexuals, while simultaneously welcoming the idea of theological discussion. Such openness to debate is well demonstrated by Prior’s invocation of theodicy, when he questions the justice in his illness and those of countless others:

if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see [...] how much suffering his abandonment has created, if all He has to offer is death, you should sue the bastard. That’s my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He. (Kushner 275-6)

Prior’s repetition of the word ‘if’ in this passage demonstrates an agnostic willingness to entertain the possibility of such an omniscient creator, thereby allowing him to put forward a nuanced and dialectical claim against the concept of AIDS apocalypticism. Rather than employing secular or scientific arguments, Prior uses reason within a Christian framework to apportion blame not to homosexuals but to God, interrogating claims regarding the love and mercy of such a creator. By positing the idea that legal proceedings should be brought against God for allowing AIDS to happen, he illustrates the folly in allowing the spiritual and secular realms to coalesce. Indeed, the litigious retaliation Prior calls for is consistent with what David Harvey identifies as the neoliberal belief that human well-being can be best attained though individual entrepreneurialism and the ‘assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade’ (A Brief History of Neoliberalism 7). In suing someone for wrongdoing and subsequently denting their personal funds, the entrepreneurial tools of the accused are hampered whilst those of the accuser are
boosted, thus completing a kind of *quid pro quo* transaction that chimes with the ‘common sense’ of everyday neoliberalism. Applying this logic to a theological context is clearly intended to appear farcical: the idea that God participates in a capitalist economy is comically absurd, not least because it serves to transfer his scripturally averred almighty power into the hands of market forces. In unveiling the speciousness of applying scripture to a contemporary neoliberal context, therefore, Prior tacitly excoriates the ways in which governmental laws and initiatives related to HIV/AIDS were (and continue to be) impacted by religious doctrine and moralistic thought.

One of the best examples revealing how such moralism has impacted US governance was the launch of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) under the administration of George W. Bush in 2003, an ongoing initiative which aims to combat HIV/AIDS worldwide by promoting sexual abstinence, faithful marriages, and condom use for those deemed to be ‘high risk’. As Marcia Oliver explains, ‘by appearing “scientific” and thus “non-political”, PEPFAR transforms socio-economic problems and inequalities into individual problems and market solutions, providing a rational legitimation for neo-conservatism’s moral agenda’ (234). This is consonant with what Anthony M. Petro identifies as a uniquely American form of religious power that is ‘perhaps most visible in cases where it has been translated into a conventionally secular vocabulary, in both the moral language of health and medicine and in rhetoric about American citizenship and its limits’ (4). As he goes on to explain, the government’s adoption of PEPFAR’s anti-sex approach was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a result of lobbying by evangelicals and politically conservative Christians hoping to influence social policy for their own partisan ends (19). It also provides a blueprint for understanding how certain public health initiatives
tacitly condemn non-normative sexual practices through the use of ostensibly non-ideological medical discourse and ‘performance-based’ data analysis, thereby rationalising discriminatory legislation. As Marcia Oliver elucidates,

Because funding decisions are based on performance and results, PEPFAR collects ‘strategic information’ to guide the allocation of resources, such as the collection of a standardized set of core indicators (e.g. number of ‘clients’ reached through abstinence-only messages) […] Through these ‘impersonal’ technologies of performance, PEPFAR is able to regulate the autonomy of institutional action ‘from a distance’ (Rose 1996: 57) and align it with the political and […] moral imperatives of neo-conservatism.

Neoliberal market rationality serves to depoliticise abstinence-only messaging as a common-sense legislative option in this way, thereby sanctioning neoconservative moralism as being in the best interests of the state. As Wendy Brown notes in ‘American Nightmare’, the kind of neoliberal technologies instantiated by PEPFAR allow neoconservative governance to steer a religiously interpellated citizenry away from certain tenets of liberal democracy. Thus, ‘egalitarianism, civil liberties, fair elections, and the rule of law […] lose their standing at the conjuncture of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, becoming instruments or symbols rather than treasures, indeed becoming wholly desacralized even as they are rhetorically wielded’ (‘American Nightmare’ 702). It is in this way that we can begin to understand how the millenarian discourse used to demonise the HIV-infected managed to infiltrate mainstream media platforms towards the end of the twentieth century. As civil liberties and notions surrounding equality eroded, overtly discriminatory groups such as the “Moral Majority” were swiftly able to gain influence within the neoliberal political sphere.
Reading religious millenarianism as intertwined with its secular articulations, therefore, is helpful when it comes to understanding the role neoliberalism played in boosting millennial fervour towards the end of the twentieth century. Returning to *Angels’* exploration of millenarianism, it is noteworthy that this imbrication of the religious and the secular is explored through various characters’ musings on problems such as the future of the global economy or the Earth’s warming climate. Justice Department official Martin, for instance, declares the upcoming millennium as the dawning of the ‘end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan’ (Kushner 66–7). More than just an apt metaphor for the apocalyptic nature of the AIDS crisis, for many the millennium heralded the strengthening of a sacred new form of capitalism that promised growth and prosperity. As Coronil states, the end of the millennium marked the victory of capitalism over socialism after a protracted confrontation that polarized humanity during much of the twentieth century. Its triumph at this time makes capitalism appear as the only valid social horizon, granting it a sacralized sense of finality that conjures up what Sylvia Thrupp identified as the millennial expectation of “a perfect age to come.” (63)

For some, then, in a world approaching the end of a protracted and turbulent Cold War, neoliberalism offered a salve for what were deemed to be the evils of communism as seen in the Soviet Union; a new era of prosperity and freedom. That this apparent prosperity came at the end of what magazine magnate Henry Luce termed the ‘American Century’ in 1941 – a century characterised by the supposed political, cultural and economic domination of the United States and a conceit that endures to this day – appeared to consolidate the notion that a culture of unbridled
entrepreneurship, free-marketeering and the pursuit of the American Dream had emerged as the common-sense result of civilisational progress. As David Harvey points out, ‘whereas the geographical language of empires suggests a malleable politics – empires rise and fall and are open to challenge – the “American Century” suggests an inevitable destiny,’ thereby naturalising the neoliberal conjuncture that emerged at the end of the twentieth century as somehow morally superior and enlightened compared to competing ideologies (The New Imperialism 54). Kushner, of course, is no proponent of dawning Reaganite neoliberalism, as demonstrated in his portrayal of the amoral Cohn and the quasi-socialist aspects of the play set out in this study’s introduction. However, the political complexity of Angels demonstrates an understanding of the seductive appeal of millenarian/neoliberal ideologies that offer uncomplicated narratives espousing the preordained superiority of US-style liberal democracy: similar to the play’s ambivalent or agnostic position on eschatological and theological discourse, Kushner offers a tempered approach to his portrayal of Republican sympathisers, refusing to demonise their views as straightforwardly individualistic (or, as Louis labels them, ‘everything bad and evil in the world’ [Kushner 203]) and acknowledging the striking power of religious belief to fortify political inclination.

Joe, for example, influenced by the rhetoric of Republicans such as Martin, is quixotic in his view that ‘America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That’s what President Reagan’s done’ (Kushner 26). Joe’s tendency to posit easily refutable ideas such as America’s ‘sacred position among nations’ as fact can be attributed firstly to an unwavering and dutiful dedication to the Mormon faith. Strict adherents to Mormon doctrine believe that America was
discovered twice – in both ancient and modern eras – by men inspired by divine forces. Indeed, doctrines associated with the Church of Latter-day Saints assert the divine importance of America as the birthplace of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, rendering believers in awe and indebted to the very ground on which they walk (Sanborn-Jones 14). Sacralising American soil in this way, therefore, accords with the capitalistic and imperialistic connotations of the ‘American Century’, and contributes to the hegemonic process that has seen everyday neoliberalism crystallised as ‘common sense’.

Although Joe displays both moments of cowardice and cruelty throughout the play, particularly in the callous way in which he leaves his wife, his often blind subjugation to both Mormon doctrine and neoliberal individualism render him a sympathetic figure. Joe’s inability to think critically in this way is made most clear in his various interchanges with Louis. Although some of his views and fundamental beliefs, particularly surrounding homosexuality, gradually shift when he starts sleeping with Louis, his identifications with conservatism and the individualistic tenets of neoliberal doctrine remain. Take, for example, a moment when Louis reveals that he has dug up old court documents containing the details of a lawsuit with which Joe was involved:

LOUIS: It’s sort of brilliant, in a satanic sort of way, how you conclude – (Continue below:)
JOE: I don’t believe this.
LOUIS: (Continuous from above): –How you conclude that these women had no right to sue under the Air and Water Protection Act because–
JOE: My opinions are being criticized by the guy who changes the coffee filters in the secretaries’ lounge! (Kushner 247)
Rather than justifying or even re-evaluating his past decisions, Joe dismisses the legitimacy of Louis’s grievances by dint of his status as an office clerk. Common-sense neoliberalism appears to have stripped him of the critical tools required to reply directly to Louis’s charge, instead encouraging him to view the argument through a lens of meritocratic essentialism: Joe’s job is imbued with higher status and earning power so his value as a citizen must be greater and, by extension, his opinions more valid. Whilst such an outlook may appear cruel and mercenary, Joe is still painted as a figure of pity and sympathy. Bewildered by Louis’s attack on his past decisions, he cries ‘Why are you doing this to me?! I love you! Please believe me, please, I love you. Stop hurting me’ (Kushner 249), a victim, perhaps, of ideological conditioning orchestrated by the Mormon Church and his Republican colleagues at the appeals court. Moments like this demonstrate an endeavour on Kushner’s part to de-essentialise discourse surrounding politics and theology, conceding the complexity and power of their relationship in contemporary America. Rather than portraying its Republican characters as intrinsically and straightforwardly more selfish compared to those of a progressive persuasion, the ways in which the US’s ostensibly unlikely neoliberal-neoconservative hegemonic coalition contains myriad contradictions and ambivalences at its heart. As Hall and O’Shea note, ‘common sense feels coherent. But Gramsci argues, like the personality, it is “strangely composite” […] It tells not one narrative, but several conflicting “stories” stitched together – while failing to resolve the differences between them’ (10). Joe’s conceptualisation of his ability to love as something virtuous that exonerates him from Louis’ criticism exemplifies the strangely composite nature of his conservative ideology. His capacity for showing compassion and empathy on an individual level, a righteous good according to his faith and sense of familial duty, does not seem to cohere with his callous actions taken in a
professional setting. When this love is introduced in the context of his relationship with Louis, whose political persuasions differ so starkly, its contradictions are laid bare.

In the spirit of nuance and political complexity, then, religious and secular forms of millenarianism do not run along separate lines in Angels. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and often support and reinforce each other, demonstrating to the audience the ways in which neoliberalism, neoconservatism and evangelism in America work together in often surprising and contradictory ways. Jason Hackworth notes in his study of so-called ‘religious neoliberalism’ that

while there are certainly valid reasons for using a secular economic lens to understand neoliberalism’s rise as an ideology, such an approach falls considerably short of explaining why the idea has political salience. Although we can usefully trace the ideational rise of neoliberalism through economic texts, concepts, and institutions, such an approach does not reveal much about why the idea has gained political traction—why it has been adopted in many different countries, and why it is so appealing during times of crisis when it has such a clear track record of long- and medium-term failure. (12)

Hackworth gives details of a range of Christian political ideologies to make a case for the Religious Right’s compatibility with neoliberal values, identifying a (neo-)Calvinist philosophy and work ethic prevalent among many evangelical Americans that has both fortified and been influenced by neoliberal ideology. This can be seen, for example, in prosperity theology, a principle commonly associated with Pentecostalism, which promotes the idea that God rewards faithful followers with material wealth. As Hackworth observes, it
reinforces the Calvinist tenet of individual responsibility for material success, and its darker corollary, individual responsibility for one’s failures—a key justification for dissolving the welfare state[…]Prosperity theology sanctifies private property as an expression of piety. It provides a rationale not only for focusing on one’s own wealth creation—separate from community or society in general—but also for ignoring the poverty of others. (45)

Such an ideology is not exclusive to a particular sect or denomination but is part of a nexus of intertwining Calvinist ideas that Hackworth identifies as running through much of Christian America; ideas that can be linked to notions of divine providence and millenarianism that reinforce AIDS-related apocalypticism. Consistent with Gramsci’s ideas surrounding religion’s role in crystallising forms of ‘common sense’, such Calvinist ideas also serve to embed neoliberal tenets within the realm of the everyday as they inform accepted notions of morality and, by dint of their spiritual and metaphysical framework, are not vulnerable to empiricist forms of scrutiny.

With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will be spent exploring the ways in which the normalisation of chiliasm in political discourse in the US influenced HIV/AIDS plays between 1992 and the turn of the millennium, and indeed the conditions of their production and their reception at the time. As this thesis aims to track the development of theatre produced after the first production of Angels, I will not explore this particular play’s millenarian themes much further. After all, whilst Angels is rich with chiliastic discourse, critical literature exploring its relationship with the millennium is abundant.⁵ Discounting Angels, then, this premillennial period saw

⁵ Stanton B. Garner, quoted earlier in this chapter, provides an in-depth analysis of the play’s various examples of millenarianism in his essay ‘Angels in America: The Millennium and Postmodern Memory’; In chapter five of AIDS and America Apocalypticism, Thomas L. Long explores the ways in which ‘Jewish mysticism, alchemy (and Jungian appropriations of alchemy), Mormonism, the sacred eros of an androgy nous divinity, millennialism, American New Age spirituality […] provide the subtext for Tony Kushner’s play cycle’ (146).
a marked spate in HIV/AIDS plays and performance pieces dealing with millenarian questions through both political and theological lenses. Of these, I focus on works that use the upcoming millennium as a means to explore the future of neoliberalism, politics and faith under the scourge of HIV/AIDS in the US – Paul Rudnick’s *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1998) and Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* (1992).

**Parodying millenarianism in Paul Rudnick’s *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told***

Cited in an interview with *Back Stage* magazine a year ahead of the new millennium, playwright Paul Rudnick comments that ‘religion is in the air’ on the cusp of the twenty-first century: ‘There’s a pre-millennium fever. For a major date we need major answers’ (qtd. in Horowitz, ‘Face to Face’ 27). As Simi Horowitz explored in a later issue of the magazine, theatregoers were experiencing a recrudescence of religiosity and theological interest at the time, stating that ‘Millennium anxiety and emptiness in the face of materialistic success are two of the reasons often cited to explain the public’s renewed interest in religion’ (‘In Good Faith’ 32). Examining these issues in light of HIV/AIDS, interesting questions start to appear about the relationship between capitalism, religion and the future of HIV/AIDS at the turn of the millennium. *Fabulous*, one of Rudnick’s many plays, attempts to tie together and problematise these issues via a reimagining of the story of Genesis and other parts of the Old Testament. Gay lovers Adam and Steve fill in for the traditional Adam and Eve, subverting the tired Christian slogan ‘God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,’ while lesbian couple Jane and Mabel make for somewhat less direct spin-offs of Cain and Abel. Building on this spirit of parody and Biblical subversion, the four characters
spend the beginning of the play’s first act negotiating friendship, sex, wealth, divinity and even bestiality in a world with no former civilisation to guide them, with the act closing just before the birth of Jesus. The second act is set in modern-day New York on a Christmas Eve. Both couples are still together but remember nothing of their biblical selves. On top of this, Steve is infected with HIV and Jane has become pregnant via artificial insemination. Such a set-up facilitates complex comparisons between the biblical and modern-day versions of the characters, and by extension the ways in which religion continues to have a bearing on modern-day neoliberal America.

As William E. Burns explains, some variants of Christian millenarian doctrine, which anticipate 1,000 years of perfect life on Earth before the last judgement, posit that the society that exists during such a millennium ‘would be perfect, with total human command over nature paralleling the command over nature that Adam had enjoyed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall’ (198). The first half of Fabulous, then, can be analysed as a millenarian text in terms of its portrayal of Eden, its providential tone and its brand of future-oriented theological discussion. The play’s second half then goes on to deconstruct religious chiliasm and its secular parallels by asking questions about the legacy of HIV/AIDS, the future of the economy, and its fraught yet tight-knit relationship with Christianity in contemporary America.

Before going into how Fabulous approaches the subjects of neoliberalism and chiliasm, I will examine the political environment in which it premièred back in 1999, as well as what appears to be the play’s intended audience. In so doing, its copious intertextual references and arcane humour will be contextualised. Given the play’s biblical subversion and gay themes, it would not have been misguided to anticipate a backlash against a play such as Fabulous from offended members of the evangelical community. However, as the first reviews started coming through in 1999,
it was noted that ‘So far Rudnick has received no flak from the Christian Right in response to the piece, short of a couple of letters in the Midwest “worrying about [his] immortal soul”’ (Horowitz, ‘Face to Face’ 27). On a practical level, Martha Greene Eads points out that this can be attributed to the way in which Rudnick ‘limits his biblical content to the Old Testament, reducing his risk of offending Christians’ (165). However, it may also have something to do with how *Fabulous* positions itself in the cultural sphere. Reading *Fabulous* in terms of Sinfield’s key concepts for exploring the relationship between mainstream and subcultural work, it appears to straddle both.⁶

Indeed, after an initial show at Williamstown Theatre Festival, *Fabulous* was produced by New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW), a non-profit organisation which provides an off-Broadway ‘home for groundbreaking, adventurous theatre-makers and theatre-goers’ (NYTW). Generally defined as holding between 99 and 499 seats, off-Broadway venues host shows that are anticipated to appeal to a relatively minor portion of theatregoing audiences (Playbill); they tend to lack the mainstream appeal and high ticket prices of Broadway productions but, as has been the case for a number of hit shows including *Angels*, can transfer to bigger venues once they have earned enough critical and commercial success. Considering NYTW’s status as a non-profit off-Broadway organisation, the conditions of *Fabulous*’ first production provide adequate distance from the mainstream commercialism of New York’s central theatre circuit for the play to be thought of as isolated from it. In other words, the play’s company and venue had the potential to host subcultural work. Whether this is reflected in the play’s mode of address, however, is a rather more complex matter.

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⁶ Company, venue, constituency and address, as described on p.17 of the introduction.
On the one hand, and in a similar way to Kushner’s Angels, Rudnick employs a largely agnostic and dialectical dramaturgy in Fabulous, evincing a desire to resist alienating a particular demographic based on belief. From the play’s very beginning, the audience watch Adam and Steve’s Eden come into being through the direction of a Stage Manager, whose directorial powers clearly mirror those of an omniscient God. She calls out instructions such as ‘House to half, go, house out and pre-set, go. Creation of the world, go’ and ‘First sunset, go,’ while lighting and props come together to turn the set from a bare stage into something resembling the Garden of Eden (Rudnick 139). This technique of world-building liberates the play from ethical or theological controversy for a number of reasons. Firstly, the use of metatheatre draws attention to the play’s institutionalisation, emphasising the fact that Fabulous is merely a theatrical exploration of biblical themes in the world of the real, and does not lay claim to any spiritual or transcendent significance. Furthermore, its dissimilarity from the story on which it is based – demonstrated, for example, by the inclusion of a Stage Manager, and the fact that Jane and Mabel are not siblings and are female – is substantial enough to avoid antagonising the Christian community and encourage them to become audience members. As Rudnick himself explained in regard to the types of theatregoers he was trying to attract: ‘Rather than play separatist games, I say “No! We’ll [all] come to the party!”’ (qtd. in Horowitz, ‘Face to Face’ 27).

It could, on the other hand, be argued that by drawing the audience’s attention to the materiality of the play – of its fakery and purpose as a means to create an illusory diegesis – Rudnick promotes a detached and atheistic view of the story, providing a forum in which to critique biblical tenets and Christian principles. Indeed, the scant scholarly work on Fabulous tends to emphasise that such a metatheatrical approach has implications for how audiences watch the play as there is no ‘fourth wall’ to speak
of; no potential for any so-called ‘suspension of disbelief’. Astrid Haas, for example, posits that ‘the figure of a (female) stage manager commands lighting, scenery, and action of the drama as a Brechtian alienation device’ (279), placing *Fabulous* in a specific tradition of political theatre. However, while the play does indeed carry certain Brechtian hallmarks, it lacks the prescriptive, overtly political elements of Brechtian theatre. As David Barnett notes in his volume *Brecht in Practice*, if the ‘Brechtian method is to have any meaning, it has to be understood as enabling a radical insight into the way society and its citizens work with a view to changing both of them’ (3).

Furthermore,

Brecht proposes that actors should both play their roles and display their personalities. That is, the audience should never believe that the character on stage is the character, but rather that there is an actor playing a character by showing the difference between actor and role […] the spectator is not drawn into the action too deeply, but can remain at a distance and contemplate larger issues than a particular character’s words or actions. Brecht asks actors not to submerge themselves in their characters, but to ‘show the join’, to signal the difference. (Barnett 58)

The writing and dramaturgy of *Fabulous* is such that the distinction between its characters and the actors playing them cannot be so readily comprehended. This is because the diegetic space of Adam and Steve’s world and that of the auditorium become blurred once the audience are permitted to watch the former being built. Following its inception, Eden appears merely as another world within that which already exists; Adam and Steve’s entire universe is the stage. While the play’s parodying of biblical tenets and its overtly gay themes carry the potential to anger or offend certain audience members, Rudnick’s world-building strategy assuages this by placing Adam and Steve in a new and hermetic world all of their own where the politics
of the wider world may not apply. This ambivalence is further demonstrated by the ways in which the play’s acerbic humour refuses to hold truck with any particular group of audience members. As a reviewer explained:

It should be noted quickly that if Mr. Rudnick is spoofing basic Bible fare, he is also brazenly trafficking in stereotypes of gay men and lesbians. Adam is the neurotic esthete; Steve, the unreflective body-building type; Jane, the most combative and masculine presence of the four; and Mabel, a dizzy spiritual sort who speaks in the language of self-help manuals. (Brantley)

Given Rudnick’s attempts at spectatorial inclusivity, then, we can read parts of the play as taking light-hearted aim at several different religious and political viewpoints. Take, for example, the postlapsarian Adam’s exclamation that ‘as of today, we have all been together for 400 years. And I think we look great!’ (Rudnick 167). Although the trajectory of Rudnick’s version of Genesis diverges greatly from the biblical version – not least due to the non-generative potential of the protagonists’ homosexual relationships – I conjecture that the invocation of 400 years could be a loose reference to the following verses in Genesis:

Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign country. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will execute judgement on the nation that they will serve. Afterward they will come out with many possessions. (NET Bible, Gen. 15.13-14)

This promise of material reward for serving God may be interpreted through the lens of the prosperity theology Hackworth describes; a means for Rudnick to parody its foundations at the juncture between neo-Calvinism and neoliberalism. As Hackworth
notes, a ‘variety of biblical verses are used to justify the position that God wants his followers to be prosperous’ (41), such as the following from Deuteronomy:

You must remember the LORD your God, for he is the one who gives ability to get wealth; if you do this he will confirm his covenant that he made by oath to your ancestors, even as he has to this day. (Deut. 8.18)

The fact that Adam follows up a biblical reference that appears to vindicate the pursuit of wealth with mention of how great the foursome looks serves to compound Rudnick’s indictment of so-called ‘religious neoliberalism’. This is because such a self-congratulatory and narcissistic remark helps members of the audience less in tune with the play’s esoteric humour to easily understand that the play is taking aim at the individualism at the heart of neoliberal ideology. As Mike Featherstone mentions in an essay penned during the heyday of Reagan’s neoliberal project, ‘with appearance being taken as a reflex of the self, the penalties of bodily neglect are a lowering of one’s acceptability as a person, as well as an indication of laziness, low self-esteem and even moral failure’ (26). The pursuit of good looks stems from the dominant hegemony’s figuring of ‘citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care”’ (Brown, ‘American Nightmare’ 694), a perverse form of ‘common sense’ parodied throughout Fabulous. Immediately after the Fall, for example, Steve cries ‘I have to get to a gym!’ (Rudnick 153).

That Adam decides to reflect on the material successes of the group after a rounded 400 years betrays a kind of millenarian thought that would have resonated with an audience attending the first production of Fabulous in 1999. Indeed, the arbitrary but culturally significant marker of the end of a fourth century prompts the
group to reflect on their past and future in a way that parallels the millennial fever of the late 1990s. Adam continues his 400 year celebration by adding: ‘And yet – our happiness hasn’t been complete. We have each other, we have so much, but still – we know nothing. We have no answers. Until – right now!’ (Rudnick 167). In line with the idea of prosperity theology, then, reaching ‘completion’ would necessitate a reward that transcends anything they have experienced before. For audiences approaching the third millennium, this concept of transcendent reward could be seen in theories surrounding a new revolutionary kind of capitalism. As noted in a premillennial issue of the socialist magazine *Monthly Review*,

A dynamic global economy that has no precedents is said to be propelling the world into a new millennium of abundance. In their 1998 special double issue on ‘The 21st Century Economy,’ for instance, the editors of *Business Week* predicted that “Revolutionary technology and rapid globalization […] will send productivity soaring, allowing faster growth with low inflation and modest unemployment. This dynamic would last for decades, bringing unimagined prosperity worldwide.” (McNally)

It is the ‘unimagined’ element of such prosperity that renders this mode of thinking millenarian and represents a school of thought popularised by key neoliberal proponents during the late twentieth century. In 1989, for example, Francis Fukuyama, galvanised by the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union and a brief stint of strong economic growth across much of the Western world, prophesied the long-term triumph of economic liberalism in a now-infamous essay entitled ‘The End of History?’. For Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War and the seeming triumph over fascism and communism across much of the world reflected ‘the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,’ a conclusion he claims to reach via
Hegelian dialectical theory (3). Indeed, the theoretical framework on which Fukuyama hangs his essay is one that vehemently rejects the materialist dialectics associated with Marxist thought, which he blames for almost occasioning nuclear war. Vowing to ‘save’ Hegel’s philosophy from its associations with Marx, whose works were inspired by Hegelian dialectics, he argues for an idealist conceptualisation of consciousness as potentially autonomous from the development of the material world and at the same time capable of effecting change within it. The Marxist tradition, meanwhile, Fukuyama argues, relegates ‘the entire realm of consciousness – religion, art, culture, philosophy itself – to a “superstructure” that was determined entirely by the prevailing material mode of production’ (6). Of course, this is despite the fact that Marxist thinkers had been troubling and re-evaluating the base-superstructure framework for years by the time this essay was published, demonstrating the ways in which Fukuyama slicks an expedient gloss on certain forms of leftist scholarship to support his notion that the modern liberal state has secured man’s right to freedom and democracy through ‘ideological evolution’ (4). Although Western liberal democracy Fukuyama had not, he claimed, yet asserted itself in many developing nations, he cites the adoption of essentially neoliberal structures in China under Deng Xiao-Ping as evidence that the ideology was working its way through an increasingly globalised world, destined to become ‘the end point of mankind’s evolution and […] the final form of human government’ (4). With democratic freedoms secured and ideological conflicts consigned to the past, Fukuyama’s theoretical homogenous world free of history could be left to run primarily on economic activity, minimising the need for state governance.

It is probably fairly obvious why Fukuyama’s ideas have been progressively more reviled as global political ruptures have continued to unfold over the third millennium.
From the election of aspiring autocrats to the escalation of ecological crises, the evidence against the End of History thesis is stacking up. Whilst it may not have proved particularly valuable as a political theory, however, it has become useful shorthand for political scholars to point out the dangers of neoliberal triumphalism and certain forms of idealism proffered by free market libertarians. As Wendy Brown has noted, at ‘the triumphal “end of history” in the West, most have ceased to believe in the human capacity to craft and sustain a world that is humane, free, sustainable and, above all, modestly under human control,’ such is the power of the market as the pinnacle of civilizational achievement (Undoing the Demos 221). Going back to Fabulous, then, the supposed answer to happiness that Adam finds – belief in a Christian God – can be seen to possess similar traits to millennial capitalism in respect to its abstract nature and promise of future material wealth. Indeed, as the play unfolds across centuries and millennia, and the four protagonists continue to search for the ‘answers’ Adam demands, millenarianism and prophetical thinking, self-interest, the desire for spiritual fulfilment, and humanity’s questioning nature, are posited as transhistorical phenomena. As Harvey explains in his exploration of neoliberalism’s rise,

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit […] The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental. As “the central values of civilization.” (A Brief History of Neoliberalism 5)
For Rudnick, then, the desire to serve one’s own interests is not unique to neoliberal selfhood. Rather, the hegemonic project of neoliberalism exploits and champions innate desire for personal autonomy, injecting it with a kind of market logic that naturalises competitiveness to the detriment of sociality and communitarianism. In a somewhat pessimistic way that could be seen as erring on the side of essentialism, therefore, Fabulous tracks this process, exposing, as we will see shortly, the logical conclusion of extreme individualism as painful and unfulfilling.

The insidiousness of this culture of individual responsibility reaches its apotheosis towards the end of Fabulous. Here, discussion of Steve’s HIV/AIDS serves as a kind of epilogue, exposing the ways in which, despite its seemingly greater acceptance of gay people, contemporary neoliberal-neoconservative America continues to punish non-normative sexualities. Alert audience members watching Act Two should be able to recall that Steve sets out for Sodom in the first act of the play, saying of Adam,

I don’t want him back! I want a new boyfriend! No, I want lots of new boyfriends! A new one every night, every minute! I’m sick of being in love! Where can I go? To meet every man who isn’t Adam? (Rudnick 196)

Steve’s infection in Act Two, then, can be read as viral retribution for his transgressive desires; even in a world where homosexuality is permissible, non-monogamy remains an immoral and punishable act. On one level, using the sodomitic trope typically levelled against all gay men to instead punish non-monogamy can be interpreted as a parodic criticism of the views of contemporary and popular conservative gay commentators such as Larry Kramer. As Eric Rofes noted in 1998, around the same time as the first production of Fabulous, Kramer’s indictment of supposedly sex-obsessed male culture reflected a sentiment that was proliferating within gay
communities, and was ‘increasingly reflected on the editorial pages and in letters to the editor of gay publications, as well as in a number of current nonfiction volumes by popular male writers’ (135). In a screed against the kind of casual sex Steve searches for in *Fabulous*, Kramer states, ‘You cannot fuck indiscriminately with multiple partners, who are also doing the same, without spreading disease, a disease that has for many years also carried death. Nature always extracts a price for sexual promiscuity’ (‘Sex and Sensibility’). By bestowing such agency upon nature and rendering it god-like, Kramer employs a logic akin to that of prosperity theology, demonstrating how seemingly secular arguments can emulate and corroborate the doctrine of the Religious Right. As Rofes explains, the rhetoric of queer commentators such as Kramer, Andrew Sullivan or John Rechy ‘often default[s] to solutions to complex social problems that are uncannily similar to strategies embraced by neoconservative social critics’ (159). Rudnick’s evocation of Sodom, then, in its subversive appropriation, can be read as a means to expose the specious reasoning behind the chiliastic/apocalyptic rhetoric espoused even by queer identified groups towards the end of the twentieth century.

The interrogation of millenarian and religious attitudes towards HIV/AIDS becomes increasingly explicit as *Fabulous* reaches its conclusion. Although Steve contracts HIV at a time after the introduction of life-saving protease inhibitors (or as Mabel calls the 28 pills he has to ingest a day, ‘twenty-eight miracles’), Rudnick shuts down any temptation to interpret this as evidence of divine intervention: in the play’s closing lines, Steve reveals that his HIV is drug-resistant (Rudnick 230). He tells Adam, ‘Look, they don’t work for everyone, and no one’s been on them that long, and the side effects are worse than the disease’ (241). In this way, Rudnick points out the arbitrary and capricious nature of disease, and the error in trying to make sense of it purely through the lens of religion or theology. The corollary to this is his subsequent
renunciation of other secular forms of millenarianism. For example, when Steve’s predicament ultimately causes Adam to renounce his faith in God, he finds immediate comfort in the Christmas present Steve gives him, excitedly proclaiming ‘Oh my God. You got it. This is just what I wanted. This is cashmere. This is Armani. This cost a fortune’ (242). In so easily casting off his faith in favour of consumerism and wealth, Rudnick exposes certain aspects of religion and neoliberal consumerism as interchangeable, illuminating the various similarities that lie at their heart. That Adam treats faith in such a fickle way, renouncing it when it fails to serve him, also demonstrates the inevitably unsatisfactory nature of absolutist reasoning. Steve rails against such reasoning in its many forms at the end of the twentieth century, taking aim at the absolutism of organised religion and neoliberalism – and the millenarianism that compounds them. Indeed, he concludes in the play’s final scene, ‘Stop looking for comfort, or reasons, or peace. I don’t need that. I never have. Take a real risk. Ask nothing. Know nothing’ (242). In this way, Steve calls for a nuanced, and by extension empathic, approach to those suffering from HIV, renouncing the projection of religious and political judgement or values onto its sufferers in a neoliberal age.

That Rudnick was able to interrogate the consolatory aspects of religion in this way with minimal backlash was very rare for second-generation theatre. Whilst the queer and, indeed, countercultural aspects within *Fabulous* are writ large in its graphic descriptions of sex and brazen biblical subversions, Rudnick was able to temper these and achieve relatively mainstream success in part thanks to his willingness to expose how millenarianism in its many forms can be revealed to contain foolish or idealistic notions. Potential for scandal was extinguished by its vaudevillian humour, willingness to satirise a considerable portion of American society, and relative lack of earnestness, tactical moves that allowed Rudnick to produce anti-neoliberal political
theatre that was not vulnerable to attack in the way that other second-generation plays were. Indeed, Rudnick’s dramaturgical techniques were quite different from those in Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*, a play which vociferously attacked AIDS apocalypticism and millenarianism, whilst at the same time galvanising audiences to collectively and earnestly imagine the kind of queer utopia parodied in *Fabulous*. Hailed by Thomas L. Long as a ‘queer evangelist’, Miller parodied evangelical orators of the Christian Right to disseminate his own notion of queer chiliastic utopianism (Long 29). Like *Fabulous*, then, *MQB* retains the humorous bent of its second-generational counterparts. Unlike Rudnick’s play, however, it reveals an insouciance towards the commercial stage and a dedication to pleasing queer audiences alone.

**Testimonial millenarianism in Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body***

While *Fabulous* and *Angels* explore chiliasm and its neoliberal associations from a largely interrogatory and distant position, Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* operates within the millenarian framework of Christian evangelical oratory tradition to denounce neoliberal culture, taking on the role of (in his words) ‘a sweaty tent-revival preacher’ (*Body Blows* xviii). During the performance, Miller ruminates on the seemingly apocalyptic nature of AIDS before disseminating a chiliastic entreaty for queer liberation and utopianism in the upcoming millennium. Indeed, Long notes that ‘Miller has been variously compared to an evangelist, a preacher, and a pastor,’ utilising a brand of rhetoric and audience participation in his performance pieces stylistically akin to that of Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson (38). However, in diametric opposition to the evangelists of this homophobic ilk, the focus of Miller’s work is almost exclusively
the subject of his own queerness; providing an autobiographical history of his body and the ways in which it can ‘shine a light on systems of prejudice that are just so damn unfair’ (Miller, *Body Blows* xvi). As ‘a performance artist, a gay man, and a member of the Parish Church St. Augustine-by-the-Sea in Santa Monica, California,’ (Miller, *1001 Beds* 173) Miller occupies a tense and uncomfortable position in the cultural sphere: as he explains in an essay on his early work, ‘I had a feeling of simultaneous censorship: from the nutso Right – that I should keep my queer mouth shut – and from people in the secular community of artists and intellectuals, that I should soft pedal the religion thing’ (*1001 Beds* 181). Indeed, that Miller’s work has been attacked by a plurality of constituencies is testament to just how complex and contradictory its themes are. By exploring the economics, demographic constituency and mode of address of Miller’s solo performance, in conjunction with the form and content of the piece itself, we can begin to untangle MQB’s complex relationship with religion, HIV/AIDS, the upcoming millennium and the sheer ubiquity of everyday neoliberalism.

One of the first things to note about Miller when determining where his work sits in the cultural sphere is that much of his recognition as an artist has been built up from his inclusion in a group known as the ‘NEA Four’. In 1990, the group were embroiled in a scandal that came to represent the ways in which America’s culture wars affected artistic production. Initially on track to receive funding from the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to create new work, the funding body’s chairman John Frohnmayer vetoed their grants on ideological grounds. As Annette J. Saddik explains, While the NEA theatre panel voted unanimously to award grants to eighteen solo performance artists, the NEA chairman at the time, John Frohnmayer, vetoed the decision and denied grants to Karen
Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck – later known as the ‘NEA Four’ – citing ‘political realities’ and maintaining that their work was ‘indecent.’ (192)

Such governmental condemnation, then, inscribed Miller’s work as countercultural within the public consciousness for its perceived oppositional nature, concretising its queerness before anyone even had the chance to experience it. The paucity of funding he received at this time meant that performances were often confined to small student-run theatres and queer venues, affecting the extent to which his work could be publicised. In this way, Miller’s appeal was largely confined to gay men. As one student reviewer noted of an early performance of *MQB*, ‘the audience, primarily composed of gay male couples, filtered in. There was a certain sense of isolation involved in being in the midst of a group where everyone knew everyone else, and greetings between them flew thick and fast’ (Sukthankar). However, Miller was under no illusion as to the relatively niche nature of his work. In a much-cited essay co-authored with David Román, ‘Preaching to the Converted,’ Miller makes a claim for the political importance of queer gatherings within the theatre. In a riposte to the criticism that *MQB* is merely ‘preaching to the converted’ – telling queer audiences what they already know and believe – he notes that, historically, queer theatre is replete with political value for marginalised groups:

At once a place for queer art and queer gathering, lesbian and gay theatre remained primarily theatre of, by, and for lesbians and gay men. The idea of forging community, however tentative or utopian, rested on the assumptions that community is a political necessity and a viable possibility. The history of lesbian and gay theatre accepts the notion of community as axiomatic and stages the struggle to sustain and expand community as one of its primary objectives. (qtd. in Miller and Román 173-4)
In this way, Miller’s work was not developed with the aim of appealing to or addressing mainstream audiences. As will be explored, MQB acts as an exhortation to other queer identified people to adopt a mode of thinking that looks towards a queer form of utopia, in some ways living up to countercultural label bestowed on the piece by the NEA.

Countercultural work should be differentiated from subcultural work: as I have noted, the subcultural elements of Angels, for example, might be recognised as the play’s exploration of queerness under Reaganist culture, its dissonance with mainstream values and its belief that mainstream culture is capable of the reform necessary to achieve the ‘progress’ so reviled by the Angel of History. Although there are inevitable overlaps and ambiguities between sub- and counterculture, the latter can generally be defined by its greater discordance with the values of prevailing hegemony. While Kushner’s play largely seeks to examine how the dominant culture might progress and reform, Miller envisions its millennial and utopian upheaval. Take, for example, the beginning of the performance, in which Miller imagines his autobiographical journey as a ‘queer little spermlet’:

A hideous sperm that looks like Jesse Helms tries to catch me in a net. I elude him! A herd of sperm who look like the military Joint Chiefs of Staff try to kick me out of this fallopian tube! I elude them, as well. Then a bunch of hulking macho slimebag straight-pig sperm shove and try to elbow me out of the way…And…ECCE HOMO!!! Behold the fag. And the big cry to the universe. Time to be born. (‘My Queer Body’ 312)
One of the first things to note about this passage is the way in which Miller’s cry of ‘ECCE HOMO’ operates within the context and form of the performance. Although Miller obviously constructs a humorous reappropriation of the word ‘homo’, imbuing the slur with biblical grandiosity in a way that unapologetically asserts his sexuality, he also equates his newborn self with a scourged Christ. As Miller explains in an essay entitled ‘Jesus and the queer performance artist’, his relationship with Christianity is a complicated one, particularly considering the apocalyptic discourse so often directed towards gay men by evangelicals. However, he describes the way in which the emergence of AIDS has altered his outlook:

The skinny guy up on the cross hits me stronger now after seeing so many emaciated friends wither away. I.N.R.I. over the cross has been replaced by A.I.D.S. over the hospital bed […] My friends and I have also had to create or rediscover rituals for burying our dead and marking their passing. This has thrown us back to our spiritual upbringing (if any) and meant a new call to recreate our relation to the universe and God/Goddess. (1001 Beds 178)

In successfully relating to Christ at this kind of affective, experiential level, Miller was emboldened to take on the role of a kind of queer preacher. In an extract from a journal entry, he describes

the effort to try to get a sense of who [Jesus] was and what it means now: I get this mostly through Jesus as activist […] Jesus as a member of ACT UP. The crucifixion as the ultimate disobedience. The guy building chairs. Trying to create a reality where people actually might love one another. (1001 Beds 179)

7 ‘Ecce homo’, translated as ‘behold the man’ from the Vulgate translation of John 19:5, is the phrase used by Pontius Pilate when he presents Jesus Christ to the crowd awaiting his crucifixion.
By comparing himself to Christ in *MQB* – to a figure he sees as trying to ‘create a reality’ – Miller adopts a pedagogical, preaching role. In so doing, he emphasises the fact that his performance is not merely art or entertainment. Rather, it is a form of community-based ‘work’, something facilitated by the form of the solo performance. As Eddie Paterson notes in a study of contemporary American monologic and solo performance, the monologue was used ‘as a radical form of alternative speech and politics in the new millennium’ (127), explaining that the form’s resurgence in the late 1990s and early 2000s ‘links back to the rich history of American oratory as a radical response to dominant political rhetoric and ideology and the foregrounding of solo performance as a way of exploring the practices and institutions that create political orders’ (155). The very form of Miller’s performance, therefore, prepares his audiences for the potential radicalism and countercultural nature of his work and permits diatribe against the neoliberal/neoconservative dominant culture. Furthermore, one of the primary reasons why Miller’s status as a solo performance artist allowed him to relay his political ideas via a public platform, beyond established oratory tradition, is that his work could be produced at very low cost. As laid out earlier in the introduction to this study, the theatrical sector is (to varying degrees) implicated in neoliberal culture as a result of the insidious profit-driving impetus of everyday neoliberalism. In being spurned by the mainstream arts sector in reaction to the NEA scandal, and avoiding the need to focus too heavily on the profit-making elements of his work, Miller operates on the very outer fringes of this culture. Indeed, by avoiding association with and indebtedness to funding bodies or profit-seeking theatres, Miller possesses the freedom to interrogate contemporary neoliberal hegemony as an outsider; an exilic prophet.
Having laid the foundation for radical and anti-establishment performance through the form and venue of his work, therefore, Miller is in a good position to ‘preach’ to his audiences; to make clear his vision for queer politics and protest. Returning to the passage from *MQB* I cited earlier, the figure of Senator Jesse Helms provides a good example of the ways in which Miller engages with contemporary politics through preacher-like storytelling. Helms, of course, was one of the primary orchestrators of NEA censorship. In line with the neoliberal drive for privatisation that has characterized modern times, he ultimately wanted all public arts funding to be abolished. That Miller invokes Helms in the form of a ‘hideous sperm’, at its most patent level, illustrates his opposition to these politics. Furthermore, by using the language of reproduction and gynaecology, Miller invokes questions surrounding inherence and innateness. He playfully questions whether Jesse Helms was destined to oppress his art and that of his contemporaries due to some kind of genetic default or whether he has fallen prey to robust hegemonic forces that have the potential to be denaturalised.

The first half of *MQB* answers these questions in an apocalyptic and fatalistic fashion, recounting scenes of queer death and destruction from the scourge of AIDS. He describes the ‘volcano’ of his life, inhabiting a ‘City of plague. Government of hate’ (‘My Queer Body’ 322), going on to describe how ‘Blood pours from here and here where the catheters pierced my friends’ sides so the medicine could go in their bodies. AIDS! AIDS! Broken here where Reagan and Bush smiled their do-nothing holocaust grins while my friends died,’ (325) the incendiary evocation of past atrocity serving to compound his opposition to the neoliberal governance of these presidents. That the ‘do-nothing’ quality of their grins could lead to such atrocity is a damning indictment of an anti-interventionist state that places the responsibility for the economic stability,
health and wellbeing of its citizens largely on the citizens themselves. However, as Long notes,

Although employing apocalyptic tropes – beasts, catastrophe, defilement, sacred eros – Miller was also repudiating the apocalyptic trajectory, first by climax’s closure, then by rescripting the Western mythos of the Fall – the event upon which apocalyptic closure is predicated – by refusing to leave the Garden in the first place. (44)

Miller disrupts the chiliastic trope of AIDS apocalypticism utilised by orators on the Religious Right by realising that – by virtue of his status as ‘preacher’ – he has power over the oration, and is able to relay his preferred vision of the future: ‘Maybe I can make up a new ending and maybe we’ll find our way out of the volcano’ (Miller, ‘My Queer Body’ 328). Indeed, it is at this point in the performance that Miller renounces apocalyptic millenarianism for its closely related utopic variant, telling his (largely queer) audiences ‘We’re in a universe of our own making. No more waiting. Our hoped for escape from gravity. Weightless. We’re in our own solar system’ (334). Miller’s encouragement to see beyond gravity or the solar system – phenomena whose existence scientific consensus tells us are immutable truths – acts as a metaphor for contemporary hegemony. Indeed, he asks audiences to look beyond the ‘common-sense’ orthodoxies pushed by neoliberalism in order to establish a pathway for queer liberation.

Of course, Miller’s adoption of evangelistic rhetoric and his personal parochial ties are not without complications in the context of this study. As part of an ethnographic exploration of popular evangelists (particularly televangelists) and their followers, Marla Frederick tracks the ways in which a certain devotion to
neoliberalism has become necessarily imbricated within evangelical performance and oratory. She describes the way in which, in recent decades, evangelists have come to act as testament to the legitimacy of prosperity theology in the popular imagination: indeed, with ‘perfectly cropped hair, immaculately tailored suits, expensive jewelry, and well-manicured nails, media evangelists perform the quintessential success story’ (224). By emulating the rhetorical techniques and ‘flair for the dramatic’ (Frederick 224) utilised by well-known evangelists, Miller aligns himself dangerously closely with the self-aggrandisement and individualism demanded by the neoliberal ideology he attempts to deride. His focus on beseeching audience members to valorise individual aspects of their bodies, combined with the personal testimony of his first sexual encounter in which he ‘reclaim[ed] my body from church and state’ parallels the way in which popular evangelical preachers present themselves as examples of a particular kind of success and redemption (Miller, ‘My Queer Body 318). Miller’s success can be seen as the ways in which he resists heteronormative oppressive structures, to which he ascribes his individual resilience and willpower as a primary factor. Indeed, the particular form of solo performance and personal testimony Miller utilises implicitly informs the audience that their attendance of MQB will be useful in helping them take control of their individual lives as queer folk, teaching them his own brand of countercultural coping strategies. In this way, Miller potentially perpetuates a culture of individualism and self-help that inheres within neoliberal ideology, including the idea that the neoliberal subject should be responsible for their own health, wellbeing and ultimate destiny without state intervention.

There are some tensions, then, between Miller’s desire to lambast the neoliberal governance of the Reagan administration and the form of testimonial preaching through which he does so. Peggy Phelan is one of the few performance scholars who
has attempted to problematise the politics surrounding MQB, providing an acerbic account of one particular performance:

It is extremely difficult to perform a well-rehearsed grief honestly. And the night I saw the show at P.S. 122 in New York, Miller could not quite bring it off. The house was packed. I heard a harried P.S. 122 staff member say that the house was overbooked at Miller’s insistence. (But since Miller had been one of the founders of P.S. 122, who could complain?) […] A former dancer, Miller is a fleet and graceful mover. As David Anger has it, “Tremendously talented, Miller is handsome too.” But for me, somehow, good looks, boyish charm, and perfect intentions are not, in and of themselves, the stuff of progressive representation. (32)

For Phelan, therefore, the physical beauty and apparent self-importance of a pre-show Miller represent obstacles to his countercultural aims for a radically queer politics. As Frederick’s study is quick to point out, many of the evangelical preachers that she interviewed saw the cultivation of beauty through exercise, fashion and even plastic surgery as fundamental to their appeal and ultimate commercial success. Consonant with this phenomenon, the idea that Miller’s physical appearance acts as a significant draw for audience members presents complications for its radical potential and implicates him in neoliberal commercial practices. However, such assertions necessarily remain in the realm of the speculative, as we are given no indication of the extent to which Miller cultivates his good looks or, indeed, the motivations behind audience attendance. Furthermore, for Miller to successfully subvert or parody evangelical techniques, he must to some degree adopt them.

To best elucidate the extent to which Miller rejects the individualistic or neoliberal elements of evangelical oratory tradition, we must examine the ways in which he
breaks its central tenets. One of the most obvious ways in which Miller subverts the modern evangelical penchant for glitz and glamour is by stripping completely naked for a substantial portion of the performance. In so doing, he repudiates materialistic tendencies whilst gesturing towards traditions surrounding onstage nudity in gay theatre, something explored in the introduction to this study. As Wendy Brown notes, neoliberalism promulgates competition within every sphere; every ‘endeavour, activity, and problem’ (*Undoing the Demos* 60), a competitiveness that Miller appears to mock in his subversion of modern evangelical ostentation. In fact, more than simply a means to reject the ways in which clothes instantiate a hierarchy of wealth, Miller’s nakedness places him in a position of vulnerability, inverting the position of power he holds as preacher and repudiating notions of hierarchy in its many forms, including that promulgated by neoliberalism. By baring his flesh and allowing the audience to touch him, Miller demonstrates a level of trust and faith in his fellow theatre dwellers that tacitly arraigns aspects of the neoliberal logic Brown describes; a logic that holds competition (and by extension exploitation) in highest esteem. In this way, Miller works towards building the humanistic ‘community’ he describes in ‘Preaching to the Converted’.

While many televangelists and neoliberal preachers represent an end goal, an ideal to which to aspire, the utopianism of Miller’s performance suggests no such end point. As Jill Dolan explains in a book dedicated to the study of what she terms ‘utopian performatives’,

> Utopian performatives let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity, in which spectators experience themselves as part of a congenial public constituted by the performance’s address. Hailed by these performatives, these
moments of what Marvin Carlson calls “apotheosis” or “epiphany,” spectators can be rallied to hope for the possibility of realizing improved social relations. They can imagine, together, the affective potential of a future in which the rich feeling of warmth, even love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside the theatre. (14)

With Miller’s physical and emotional nakedness constituting MQB’s mode of address, he facilitates the utopian imagination Dolan speaks of. He diverts attention away from himself by pointing out the fundamental affinities between the flesh and blood constituting the mass of bodies in the theatre, while simultaneously encouraging audience members to imagine the ideal future for this community and beyond. As Dolan points out in *Utopia in Performance*, such calls to community-building are necessarily affective within the realms of utopian performance, comprising a performance methodology that contravenes the self-serving, unsentimental impulses of the neoliberal self. While critics such as Phelan might find Miller’s ‘well-rehearsed grief’ jarring or disingenuous, its counterhegemonic potentialities allow him to criticise neoliberal hegemony and its seductive powers.

To further understand the ways in which the utopian performative operates, I return to MQB’s volcano scene. Miller’s quick switch from describing apocalyptic scenes of the past and present to employing fantastical and utopian rhetoric can be read as an example of a turn to the queer futurity theorised by scholar José Esteban Muñoz, who set out a critical methodology interrogating what he terms ‘straight time’, something which tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive
majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction. (22)

The contemporary socio-economic apparatuses which facilitate and compound ‘straight time’ are vital to the function of everyday neoliberalism: the reproductive forces of capital and generative heterosexuality are accepted as mutually dependent and necessary for the future prosperity and ‘health’ of the state. However, as Muñoz continues, envisioning a queer future may help work towards disrupting this accepted and invisibly entrenched paradigm:

Seeing queerness as horizon rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics. Pragmatic gay politics present themselves as rational and ultimately more doable. Such politics and their proponents often attempt to describe themselves as not being ideological, yet they are extremely ideological and, more precisely, are representative of a decayed version of freedom. (32)

In line with this search for a utopic horizon, then, Miller uses the familiar tropes of the millennium and the rhetoric of chiliasm to frame and make accessible his manifesto for queer futurity; to render imaginable a future which is not ineluctably reliant upon the proliferation of neoliberalism’s central tenets.

MQB, in its content, form and intended mode of address, is an attempt to disrupt and resist the restrictive ideology of neoliberalism by inverting and subverting the narrative of AIDS apocalypticism – a narrative which ultimately feeds into the

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8 Beyond Muñoz’s work, this idea has been explored by a number of scholars within the field of queer studies. For example, Lee Edelman’s polemical No Future, while offering up vastly different conclusions to Muñoz, describes how the contemporary preoccupation with reproductive futurism means that ‘our present will always be mortgaged to a fantasmatic future in the name of the political “capital” that […] children will thus have become’ (112).
reproductive futurity of ‘straight time’. Such a technique is not exclusive to MQB but can be seen in Miller’s other HIV/AIDS-centred works including Sex/Love/Stories (1991) and Naked Breath (1994), as well as the work of other solo performers such as David Drake in The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me (1994). As Elizabeth Whitney explores in her recent essay ‘The Dangerous Real: Queer Solo Performance in/as Active Disruption’ (2016), solo performance was, and still is, an effective way to ‘disrupt state representations of homogenised national identity, suggesting more complex and diverse ways of being global citizens’ (247). That Whitney adopts a genealogical approach in her study, positing Miller and other members of the NEA as progenitors of a queer solo tradition including performers that have emerged more recently such as Dynasty Handbag, M. Lamar and Erin Markey, is indicative of the fact that Miller’s works are still recognised as touchstones of oppositional activism. While Angels has, as explored in the introduction to his study, been subsumed into what I broadly term the mainstream to a certain extent, the oppositional elements of Miller’s work have largely remained oppositional. Indeed, Miller continues to tour, performing and conducting workshops in small venues within US universities. The fact that he is still recognised as a dissenting voice and continues to ‘preach’ queer futurity in minimally profitable venues is testament to Miller’s unrelenting commitment to activism and to the enduring power of the chiliasm in addressing HIV/AIDS and neoliberal hegemony through performance.

After (and potentially inspired by) Angels, then, second-generation HIV/AIDS plays exploited the millennial moment to interrogate how everyday neoliberalism was injurious to a queer community still reeling from HIV/AIDS. The 1990s saw a glut of HIV/AIDS plays filled with a similar satirical humour to Fabulous, including James Carroll Pickett’s Queen of Angels (1992) and Jonathan Harvey’s Hushabye Mountain
(1999). Instantiated by pieces such as Drake’s *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* and Ron Vawter’s *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), politically acerbic comedic solo performances like Miller’s were also very much on the rise during the decade, and were consonant with Therese Jones’s conception of the second-generation play as activist, anti-assimilationist and geared towards queer bonding and political organising rather than memorialisation and mourning. However, as neoliberal hegemony strengthened and morphed, second-generation plays lost popularity and traction in the new millennium. As Lisa Duggan noted in 2003:

> There is nothing stable or inevitable in the alliances supporting neoliberal agendas, in the U.S. and globally. The alliances linking neoliberal global economics, conservative and right-wing domestic politics, and the culture wars, are provisional – and by the new millennium, fading […] Neoliberalism’s emergent strategy for the new millennium: A new “equality” politics compatible with a corporate world order. (42)

This newfound adoption of equality discourse by neoliberal governments combined with the success of protease inhibitors to manage HIV as a chronic condition meant that AIDS apocalypticism quickly faded during the initial years of the millennium. As the following chapters will demonstrate, such equality discourse also helped to hegemonise homonormativity and warp the meaning of ‘community’ – something in which Miller was clearly invested – from a group bonded in solidarity to an identity category primed for exploitation by corporations. Third-generation playwrights, therefore, have had an increasingly restrictive set of tools when it comes to staging political theatre. In the next chapter, I turn to examine how digital technology – something often lauded as a potentially ground-breaking tool for theatre amongst
performance scholars – has evolved in line with neoliberal hegemony and the effects that this has had on the HIV/AIDS genre.
Chapter Three: From Grindr to Kickstarter: How the (neoliberal) Web 2.0 economy is shaping third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre

Writing for the journal *Print* in July 1999, in the midst of pre-millennial fever, an information architecture consultant named Darcy DiNucci coined the term ‘Web 2.0’. Intended to describe an interactive and participatory incarnation of the internet for the upcoming twenty-first century, DiNucci predicted that ‘the Web will fragment into countless permutations with different looks, behaviors, uses, and hardware hosts. The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens’ (32). In the years since DiNucci coined the term, her claims have been substantiated countless times by figures within academia, journalism and the technology industries, who have recognised the rapid and widespread move away from static, content-based web pages (Web 1.0) towards interactive, community-oriented sites (Web 2.0). As such, the inauguration of Web 2.0 is now supposed a defining (if approximate) moment in the genealogy of the internet and, indeed, the history of politics and society more generally. While it is difficult to quantify or sufficiently emphasise the extent to which Web 2.0 has impacted twenty-first-century Western society, in many ways I suspect I need not attempt to do so. From the rise of the smartphone to online shopping to social media, the digital world has annexed and transformed countless aspects of global citizens’ lived experiences – most markedly in the West – and the academic literature exploring the ways in which a newly networked culture has shaped global sociality, economics and politics is manifold.

It should come as no surprise to readers firmly implanted within the world of Web 2.0, therefore, that the inception of such digital frontiers at the *fin-de-millène* has
influenced and altered the institution of theatre, the dynamics of neoliberal culture and, indeed, the lived experiences of those with HIV/AIDS over the past two decades. As Bree Hadley explains in *Theatre, Social Media, and Meaning Making* (2017), in ‘the twenty-first century, new technologies with the potential to create [...] profound changes in theatre’s style, theatre’s relationship with its spectators, and the production, distribution and reception practices that determine theatre’s influence in the social field are emerging’ (2). Social media, for example, allows audiences to publicise their own commentary on shows (as touched upon in Chapter 1 of this study) or gain deeper insight into the behind-the-scenes production of plays. It is also ‘changing the content of shows as theatre makers start to take the relationships between family, friends, co-workers, companies and politicians playing out on social media as stimulus for the plot, dramaturgy or scenography of their work’ (Hadley 10). Furthermore, in tandem with the increasing uptake of social media amongst theatregoers, the role of the traditional theatre critic within the public sphere is, to some extent, losing its prestige. As Christopher B. Balme notes in his work on the theatrical public sphere, the traditional role of the critic and its nexus of institutional affiliations and dependencies are being worn down by ‘the blogosphere’s plethora of “grass-roots” voices’ (70). So much so, in fact, that Balme theorises the institution of theatre as nearing a technological revolution that is set to radically rearrange its existing hierarchies.

Despite Balme’s revolutionary rhetoric, addressing the political ramifications of the digital world on the institution of theatre has become a labyrinthine task for scholars and theatre practitioners today, many of whom are largely ambivalent about what the future holds. On the one hand, as digital platforms open up opportunities for punters to discuss, access and even get involved with the production of plays, they appear to represent democratising, anti-elitist forces that, as Hadley notes, ‘have the
revolutionary, or at least evolutionary, potential to contribute to marketing initiatives that pursue active, collaborative, co-creative relationships between artist and audience’ (171). On the other hand, however, while digital technologies certainly hold the potential to democratise and liberate theatrical institutions, the easy co-optation of sharing platforms by corporations and self-serving market actors demonstrates that the online world is in thrall to neoliberal ideology in a way that compromises such quasi-utopian claims of digital technology’s emancipatory, democratising power. Indeed, looking beyond the academic literature that focuses specifically on the digital world’s relationship to theatre, it is widely documented that, at a more general level, neoliberal technocrats facilitating the development of Web 2.0 have been tacitly harvesting consumer data for profitable ends and further consecrating hegemonic processes for years now. According to James Bridle, companies reliant on the sharing economy – Uber, for example – are able to get away with coercive behaviours reiterative of the wider neoliberal economy by way of a certain kind of ‘computational thinking’ (4). In other words, the convenience and life-improving qualities associated with digital services such as Uber work to convince punters that, while using such an app may not be totally problem-free, its representation as a new step in the trajectory of technological development renders it inherently emancipatory. By extension, then, many of us are blinded to the somewhat obvious fact that new technologies represent the ‘reification of a particular set of beliefs and desires; the congruent, if unconscious dispositions of its creators’ (Bridle 141). In Uber’s case, this means the desire to offer the cheapest, quickest, most convenient and, perhaps unconsciously, exploitative ride service on the market. To view theatre as somehow immune to the digital’s ability to recreate and reinforce hegemonic processes in this way is, I argue, to ignore the extent to which the digital has become imbricated in virtually every aspect of quotidian
existence. As Bridle’s work seeks to emphasise, we can no longer stand (or even think) outside technology.

While many performance scholars are fairly ambivalent about whether the encroachment of the digital world on the institution of theatre represents a reason for optimism or pessimism, scholarly work focusing on the ways in which Web 2.0 is affecting the neoliberal political economy more generally are markedly gloomier in tone. Take César Rendueles’s *Sociophobia: Political Change in the Digital Utopia* (2013), for example, which counters ideas surrounding the internet’s potential to undermine neoliberal hegemony and construct new communities free of institutional control. Rendueles figures such notions as a defunct corollary of cyberutopianism that ‘keeps us from seeing that the primary limitations of solidarity and fraternity are inequality and commoditization’ (25). As Roberto Simanowski explains in a précis of Rendueles’s argument, the culture of free-market ideology was already too deeply entrenched on a global scale by the time Web 2.0 arrived for the internet to offer much in the way of dissensual or revolutionary potential. Rather, it became subsumed within already-existing hegemonic structures as internet users enmeshed in everyday neoliberalism rejoiced in the fact that digital technology now offered ‘a virtual shopping center accessible at all times and places, with a few niches consigned to social creativity and political education’ (Simanowski ix). Indeed, that the architecture of Web 2.0 is so intimately entwined with that of contemporary neoliberalism means discussion surrounding the liberatory potential of digital technologies is often fraught with frustration, contradictions and reductionism. Marlia E. Banning employs the neologism ‘info-liberalism’ as a shorthand for this phenomenon, which she argues ultimately lays bare ‘a fundamental contradiction: Web 2.0 programs and platforms have increased the venues and participatory possibilities for public expression,
interpersonal communication, and social engagement, yet they simultaneously exploit
digital sharing to fuel the web’s exchange economy’ (490). This immanent
contradiction, then, will inform how I navigate my discussion of third-generation
HIV/AIDS plays that attempt to deal with the knotty politics of phenomena such as
social media and the new so-called ‘sharing economy’.

In terms of Web 2.0’s role in shaping the lives of HIV-positive individuals in the
West today, the ways in which status disclosure takes place and in which experiences
of living with the virus are shared, particularly amongst communities of gay men, have
seen important shifts. At the broadest level, the emergence of online communities, chat
rooms, blogs and more have generated opportunities for HIV-positive people to
interact and generate affective bonds in the face of a virus that continues to carry
stigma even decades after its emergence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, such uses
of Web 2.0 technology have gone relatively unexamined compared to one of the more
controversial uses of digital sharing technologies by HIV-positive people. Online
serosorting, or the practice of seeking out sexual partners of the same HIV status in
order to minimise the risk of transmission, has emerged out of the introduction of
online dating/hook-up apps and websites aimed specifically at gay men, and has
become a point of interest for academics researching barebacking subculture, most
notably Tim Dean and Kane Race. On one level, the emergence of apps such as Grindr,
which allows users to let people know their HIV status, or POZ, which caters
specifically for HIV-positive people, creates spaces for people to bond and serosort
that remain relatively ungoverned by traditional sexual health dictates. As ever,
however, the spectre of info-liberalism casts doubts over the platforms’ ostensibly
communitarian and anti-establishment qualities. As Dean explains in one of the most
widely cited recent works on bareback sex, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the
Subculture of Barebacking (2009), the act of bareback cruising traditionally reflects an ethos of caring and hospitality towards strangers that serves to critique the individualistic rhetoric associated with healthcare institutions promoting safe sex. Today, however, a vast proportion of bareback sex is negotiated online, ‘where the attitude of openness threatens to deteriorate into a controlled instrumentalization of the other as an object of use’ (Dean 194). This notion that dating apps dehumanise participants, presenting them as an assemblage of essentially fungible attributes (including HIV status), is a criticism that is frequently directed towards such platforms, regardless of whether they cater for straight or queer communities. However, as Tom Roach counters in an essay on queer intimacies in social media, in some ways the dehumanising aspects of apps such as Grindr are what feeds their uptake, reflecting a form of individualism driven purely by the pursuit of pleasure and destruction of the ego that actually violates such a neoliberal paradigm. Indeed, while anti-neoliberal critiques offer up rational grievances when it comes to instrumentalisation, the apparent ‘nonsense’ of online cruising must be adequately probed in order to discover what Roach figures as the ambivalence at its heart; that is, the elements of online cruising that seek out ‘alternative presents, other futures’ (Roach 78).

In the context of contemporary HIV/AIDS theatre, much of which at least touches on the near ubiquity of dating apps within queer communities in the West, this question of presence and futurity is rendered particularly salient by the unique temporality of the stage. As will be explored, the dramaturgical techniques used to portray conversations that take place on hook-up apps – which often play with spatio-temporality and the (non)presence of online interlocutors – provide valuable insight into theatre-makers’ and audiences’ attitudes towards Web 2.0 dating platforms. While many plays appear to depict the phenomenon as something undergirded almost
entirely by commodity culture, I argue that reading them through this lens alone fails to account for the communitarian potentialities that inhere within hook-up technologies. Indeed, as Roach’s essay argues, while the impersonal elements of online hook-ups encourage a mercenary attitude towards relationship-building, ‘we might [also] understand online MSM cruising as a contemporary site in which a queer ethics […] seeks to outgrow the present, outlive sexuality, and outsmart, or, perhaps, “outdumb,” the maneuverings of liberal rationality’ (78). In other words, the online cruising space might represent somewhere that can transcend neoliberal rationalities by facilitating interactions unshackled from a kind of *quid pro quo* logic.

With the scholarly world abuzz with discussion about how digital technology is affecting theatre, queer subcultures and neoliberal hegemony, then, this chapter will attempt to synthesise such debates, exploring the primary ways in which Web 2.0 technologies and the political economies they impact have shaped third-generation plays. The first half will address the ways in which the content of HIV/AIDS theatre explores how gay men’s attitudes towards, and relationships with, HIV have shifted in line with the nascence of social media and online dating apps, specifically in regards to how the neoliberal focus on self-image and self-fashioning has intensified as technologies encourage users to cultivate a ‘saleable’ virtual self. Focusing primarily on Lachlan Philpott’s *Bison* (2009) and Patrick Cash’s *The HIV Monologues* (2016), it will discuss how emerging social media practices such as online serosorting and virtual hook-ups are portrayed onstage by playwrights of third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, using work by Dean, Race and Roach as a theoretical background. The second half will then shift focus to how digital technology has affected production processes of HIV/AIDS theatre through the practice of crowdfunding, whereby internet users donate money towards a production or theatre company in return for (mostly symbolic)
gifts. More specifically, I will examine Shaun Kitchener’s *Positive* (2015), a play which was staged with the help of popular crowdfunding site Kickstarter in 2013 and granted a full run at London’s Park Theatre in 2015. Indeed, I will question the extent to which the emergent online ‘sharing economy’, whereby goods are rented, borrowed or ‘gifted’ rather than bought and sold, is implicated within neoliberal ideology, as well as how it may be altering the institutional dynamics of HIV/AIDS theatre.

Naturally, there are an untold number of ways in which performance and the digital world interact and can be discussed. As performance scholar Bill Blake observes, the digital is

> an ever multiplying and mostly impossible-to-pin-down referent, with the meanings and cultural conceptions of new media and “digital culture” multifarious and elusive. What our theatre culture is responding to with respect to the digital is just as uncertain as how it is responding. On-the-ground negotiations […] do not, therefore, have the advantage of settled outcomes or even agreed-upon terms of debate. (11)

Recent years have seen a number of influential scholarly works published on the ways in which digital media are being used for intermedial dramatic composition in the twenty-first century, including Steve Dixon’s *Digital Performance* (2007), Sarah Bay-Cheng’s *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010), and Bill Blake’s *Theatre and the Digital* (2014). Indeed, these works are responding to a gradual but conscious move by theatre directors, producers and dramaturgs to discover new ways of combining the live experience of theatre with media interfaces and digital technologies. Mainstream examples of such attempts include the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010), an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* that was ‘performed’ entirely through the medium of Twitter, or New Paradise Laboratories’ *Extremely
Public Displays of Privacy (2011), which encouraged spectators to log on to the same digital platforms as its actors, thereby blurring the diegetic spaces inhabited by audiences and characters (BWW News Desk). Apart from, arguably, the National Theatre’s decision to livestream Angels in America to cinemas throughout the UK during its 2017 run, there are few examples of such intermedial digital incorporation within the realms of HIV/AIDS theatre. Indeed, that my study focuses on theatrical interactions with the digital that are largely peripheral to the dramaturgies of the plays themselves – such as online reviews, crowdfunding schemes and the hook-up applications that inform many of their narratives – is not, I claim, an oversight or lacuna in my conception of third-generation theatre. Rather, it comes down to the fact that twenty-first century HIV/AIDS theatre is, for the most part, conservative in its use of technology on stage or as part of performance. As the phenomenon of crowdfunding shows, this is largely attributable to simple economics: incorporating cutting-edge technologies into new productions can be costly and, apart from a few mainstream hits, many contemporary HIV/AIDS plays remain on the theatrical fringes. New technologies, then, are more often implemented to encourage people to engage with (and, indeed, fund) these performances rather than as dramaturgical tools.

Volatile intimacies: Staging digitally mediated discourse in Lachlan Philpott’s Bison and Patrick Cash’s The HIV Monologues

In his recent work Theatre & Social Media (2016), Patrick Lonergan singles out social media as a force with the power to alter the very way in which we conceptualise performance and performativity, forcing ‘new ways of thinking about authenticity, creative proprietorship, authorial intention, and the relationship between artist and
audience, among many other urgent issues’ (5). While there are many third-generation HIV/AIDS playwrights who forego the opportunity to use digital technologies as dramaturgical tools, then, the plays they produce and the audiences they attract are necessarily touched by the ways in which digital technologies are altering our conceptions of authenticity and performance in a neoliberal world. As a recent study looking at the phenomena of so-called ‘social media influencers’ and ‘micro-celebrities’ uncovered, the rise of digital technologies and social media has resulted in an unavoidable obsession with ‘self-branding’ and commodification of our online and offline selves (Khamis et al.). Researchers on the project noted a correlation between the shifting ways in which subjectivity is conceptualised and the redirection towards the self of branding techniques historically reserved for traditional commodities. In some ways, this phenomenon can be interpreted as reacting to seismic global shifts in our economic and political landscape, allowing individuals vulnerable to the seductions of neoliberal selfhood to make sense of a world of increasing wealth inequality and retain a sense of autonomy. As the scholars of this study conclude, ‘self-branding through social media can be understood as a way to retain and assert personal agency and control within a general context of uncertainty and flux. Therefore, it harmonises with neoliberal notions of individual efficacy and responsibility’ (Khamis et al. 195). The normalisation of self-commodification, then, can be seen as a result of everyday neoliberalism’s encroachment on individual subjectivity, facilitated by new digital technologies. Indeed, the question of how this phenomenon affects social relations within communities of gay men is foundational to the play with which I will begin my discussion about staging digitally mediated discourse: Lachlan Philpott’s *Bison*. 
Bison starts with a scene set in what, we soon infer, is a waiting room of men getting tested for HIV. The characters are not named, and are denoted in the playtext simply as 1, 2, 3, and 4. As illustrated by the following extract, they narrate a detailed account of their non-verbal communications while tension surrounding their impending test results seems to saturate the room:

1 Eyes in this room with nowhere to rest. Get it out of the way.
1-4 Clock ticks
2 He’s looking at me/
3 He’s looking away/
4 I’m looking at him/
1 I’m looking away
3 him behind the frosted window/
2 his lips/
1 mouths words, asks something
4 smutty fuck me grin/hey
2/3 Hey
4/1 hey/
3 clock ticks
2 door opens/
4 door shuts/
...
1-4 Clock ticks.
1 I’m 32/
2 I’m 17
4 I’m 29/
3 45, 46, 47, 48
2 Am I too late?
3 Am I too late?
1-4 am I too late? (Philpott 26-7)
One of the first things to note about this scene is that the body is used as the primary means for interaction within the waiting room as characters employ gesture and non-linguistic communication while they await their results. Indeed, the flirtatious games played with characters’ eyes, the visual language saturating the ‘smutty fuck me grin’, and the way in which a character’s lips metonymically ‘mouths words’ combine to suggest a carnality to these relationships that transcends the need for verbal communication. The scene also illustrates an intense focus on temporality with the repeated chorus of ‘clock ticks’ and the urgent refrain of ‘am I too late?’ demonstrating the characters’ fixation on notions of linearity, ageing and mortality. Indeed, that the characters state their relatively young ages directly after a chorus of ‘clock ticks’ gestures towards the idea that they are about to die prematurely and, therefore, towards the era before the introduction of protease inhibitors. While there is no explicit mention of HIV/AIDS, the brevity of this scene (in the playtext it spans only two pages) combined with the fact that the characters are unnamed and inhabiting an ambiguous spatio-temporality, encourages audience members to find connections or points of difference between this inaugural exchange and later scenes in which the named, central characters discuss the virus. Indeed, while the temporal details of this section of the play are ultimately unknowable, its hints towards mortality and death make it a useful gauge against which to compare the politics of flirting and queer relationship-building in a pre-protease-inhibitor world with that of the early Web 2.0 century.

Take, for example, the following extract which introduces Richard, a gay man in a long-term relationship of over twelve years, who solicits sex from men online:

[Richard at a mirror. Three males appear but are only partially visible, they are their on-line profile pics; a piece of arse, a hard cock and a shaved off buff chest or something.]
Comparing this interaction with that of the waiting room scene, it is clear that there are a multitude of ways in which they differ. Unlike the gestural, carnal sexuality evident in the men awaiting their results, the sexuality of online users is shaped by the abstractions of digital media. The body becomes purely an end goal to be ‘earned’ or seduced as its role as mediator is eliminated, thereby facilitating only a one-way form of somatic communication: the body becomes a static signifier of sexual availability and attractiveness. The stage directions aptly embody these new dynamics: the fact that the nameless males are partially visible – reduced to what they see as their most alluring, sexual body parts – acts as a kind of visual metaphor for the reductionist, superficial aspects of social media. Furthermore, the fact that, as the playtext states, these men ‘are their on-line profile pics’ (31, emphasis my own) reveals the extent to which they see themselves as commercial entities: their online selves are ultimately one and the same as their ‘real-world’ selves. Indeed, that Richard is looking at himself in the mirror as he interacts with men on the site is a particularly telling piece of staging: he lends some attention to his online interlocutors but at the same time is almost entirely focused on himself and the marketability of his own body. Later in the scene, Richard’s essential isolation from the men with whom he interacts becomes clear by some apparently monologic asides related to his boyfriend:
Pete and I live together. Have lived together for twelve years. We have a mortgage. Friends of ours put their money up their noses but we...

1 Want to fuck or what? Wired with a big pink plank of throbbing meat and a load to shoot right now now now

R We go shopping every Saturday morning. There’s usually cute men… Supermarket’s changed hands three times but we have been faithful…well, we’ve stayed together

4 thanks for checking me out you dirty slut dog man woof woof/.

(Philpott 33)

The sexual solicitations from users of the online platform he engages with are presented more as distractions from his story than as fully realised characters, something reflected by the fact that Richard is afforded a name, while the other men are, again, only numbers. Furthermore, the fact that Richard’s replies are utter non-sequiturs is evidence of a kind of oblivious egocentricity. In this way, the self-serving individualism of online hook-up applications is laid bare; a product of everyday neoliberalism that the architecture of digital technologies only compounds. It is much easier, after all, to ignore the sexually explicit requests of potential lovers when mediated via the faceless interface of a phone screen.

Of course, as I will explore shortly, the notion that the use of concupiscent language online is purely self-serving and transactional is a rather reductive, myopic view of such digital discourse. However, it is a view that audiences of Bison seem encouraged to adopt by reason of the apparent duplicity and contempt for conventional morality that the online sexual marketplace has instilled in Richard. Indeed, the following passage, in which Philpott describes his motivations for penning the play, is illustrative of a certain kind of moralism that is a concomitant of some anti-neoliberal critiques of digital culture and could conceivably have influenced the writing and
In describing his issues with contemporary gay male culture, which include its unquestioning embrace of the virtual, its apparent obsession with appearances, and what he sees as a collective ‘amnesia’ in regard to HIV/AIDS, Philpott states that:

"Out of sight out of mind it seems and so everyone goes and fucks bareback and thinks it’s okay [...] My feeling is that it is like some huge unspoken suicide mission of the next generation because common sense has been thrown aside for a hedonistic lifestyle and the assumption that PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis] will save them and if that doesn’t work it hardly matters anyway because nobody gets ugly lesions and dies from it now anyway. (qtd. in Campbell, ‘From Bogeyman to Bison’ 205-6)"

The term ‘common sense’, while not precisely defined in the context of this extract, seems to be coterminous with the normative rhetoric of safety problematised by scholars such as Dean and Race. Indeed, Philpott’s invective against contemporary gay culture reveals a neoliberal rationalism that venerates personal responsibility and throws up a paradox embedded within Bison’s critique of the self-serving mechanisms of online hook-up culture. As Race argues in Pleasure Consuming Medicine: The Queer Politics of Drugs (2009), the introduction of effective protease inhibitors effectively ‘privatised’ the experience of HIV. As the use of criminal provisions to prosecute those who passed on the virus proliferated around the world, the idea that sex came with shared responsibilities was undermined, and HIV prevention became a matter of ensuring seropositive individuals took on sole responsibility for containing the virus. Meanwhile, caring community practices and volunteerism amongst the queer community became increasingly marginal and the epidemic came to be seen ‘as an aggregate of disparate individuals with viruses capable of being managed by these
individuals, “in partnership” with doctors’ (Race 116). In some ways, then, Philpott subscribes to this popularised view by condemning the apparent ‘hedonism’ of gay men who do not adhere to current recommendations put out by the medical establishment, somewhat contradictorily attacking their individualistic desire to avoid ‘ugly lesions’ while simultaneously placing all responsibility surrounding disease prevention on gay men as individuals in a sexual marketplace. That Philpott also appears to attack the provision of PEP as a medication that encourages promiscuity further illustrates a form of moralistic judgement based on the tenets of individualism and *quid pro quo* economics. He implicitly asks why certain gay men should be offered a ‘way out’ (which they may not have to pay for), when their behaviour, to his mind, warrants punishment or at least the attendant fear of death that haunted many during the 1980s and 1990s.

By considering this recent manifestation of neoliberal, punitive attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, then, it becomes easier to compare the different symbolisms that the virus holds within a contemporary online cruising space and that of an offline (potentially crisis-riven) past. Between the men awaiting their test results in the physical space of the waiting room, it is a spectral, malevolent force. While the unspoken nature of HIV’s presence illustrates its destructive potential, it also appears as a force for bonding and communitarianism as the men use their fateful situations as excuses to build flirtatious rapports with each other. That they share their ages with their peers and the audience before the final chorus of ‘am I too late’ is not only a way of emphasising the tragedy of diagnosis, but a way of sharing in each other’s pain and looking beyond their immediate personal interests. In the world of the online hook-up forum, however, HIV has apparently become one of many ‘stats’ passed around in digital discourse:
This passage aligns with Race’s conception of the online user profile as a ‘market device’ that ‘equips users with certain capacities and formats practices of self-representation, informing activities such as searching, evaluating, sorting and selecting among the various “goods” on offer’ (54). The positioning of the questions ‘neg?’ and ‘poz?’ alongside requests for information about relatively superficial physical attributes such as whether interlocutors are tattooed, or the size of their genitals, appears to demonstrate that HIV has been commodified in this way. Abbreviating ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ to the slangy ‘poz’ and ‘neg’ dilutes the typically emotionally and politically loaded discourse surrounding HIV status, downgrading the virus to just one of myriad sexual preferences in an online marketplace. At the same time, the staccato rhythm and almost stichomythic interchange of the above passage demonstrates that safe sex negotiation has been reduced to something akin to an auction or stock exchange, situating it somewhere in the realm of commerce. In this way, Bison clearly attempts to track the shifting dynamics of sexual negotiation as it has moved increasingly into the digital domain, the consequences of which have been scrutinised by a number of scholars interested in topics such as serosorting. Tim
Dean’s aforementioned text, for example, ultimately argues against the instrumentality of platforms such as Grindr, particularly when it comes to online serosorting, claiming that it goes against the communitarian, nurturing and anti-establishment ethos that other kinds of virus containment practices afford.

While it is clearly tenable that such instances of serosorting within Bison illustrate the self-serving, somewhat faceless elements of the practice, interpreting them as the products purely of neoliberal ideology is a reductive move. As is characteristic of the info-liberal culture in which hook-up platforms are mired, critique of such technologies is ripe with contradictions and tensions, mainly existing between the apparently neoliberal impulses they encourage and their potential to satisfy certain sexual desires and fantasies. However, as Roach explains, an anti-neoliberal critique might be modulated by heeding the ‘ego-lessening indignities and pleasures’ that occur on MSM forums (60). While the strong influence of neoliberal culture on online hook-up media is quite clear, the online interface may also help nurture affective bonds as ‘in the virtual atmosphere of shared estrangement, the destructive ego might be humbled if not humiliated, unknown selves and unusual intimacies born, and respect for the inviolable alterity of the other learned’ (Roach 57). Following Leo Bersani’s ideas surrounding cruising as constitutive of a ‘scattering’ of the self amongst superficial acquaintances, or akin to ‘ecological’ rhythms like the cycle of the moon, Roach believes that the online forum facilitates a ‘flittering among aestheticized object-others [that] moves to a music that exceeds the ebb and flow of individualized desire’ (67). In this way, he elucidates what I consider the strong (and in many ways irresolvable) tension between competitive neoliberal individualism and individualism driven by the sexual gratification that comes from instrumentalising or objectifying the other. Using popular hook-up app Grindr as an exemplary instrument of the
aforementioned self-scattering, for example, Roach compares the appearance of its gridded interface to that of Andy Warhol’s painting *100 Cans* (1962):

As dehumanizing and, literally, objectifying as this analogy may seem, the Warhol canvas envisages the form of whatever belonging: difference becomes identical yet remains discreet; units “touch” but do not violate; similitude unbinds the subjects, yet singularity remains intact; relating is not a Venn diagram but bounded. This community, for lack of a better word, has everything and nothing in common; it coheres merely in the form and movement of its seeking. (71)

In this way, he argues, users of Grindr are provided the opportunity to mingle and communicate in a way that does not involve the impetus to cultivate oneself as a worthy and saleable subject. Users may also circumvent the need to engage in the kind of transparent, somewhat ingratiating forms of written and verbal expression valorised on online communication platforms such as Twitter (as examined in Chapter One). In other words, the ‘forced social niceties’ that the neoliberal subject typically uses to profitably establish points of common ground and mutual desire during transactional discourse are not mandatory within the online MSM marketplace. In this context, affects are not merely agreeable, commodified means by which to cynically sell one’s ‘best self’ in order to earn sexual gratification. Rather, as noted by a number of other scholars studying the phenomenon of MSM hook-up apps, competitive resentments and disarmingly frank descriptions of sexual preferences are put on full display, betraying a possible ‘attempt to invent a language not yet captured by capital,’ assuming such a thing is possible (Roach 74).

In this way, then, the language of the online forum which, as parts of *Bison* demonstrate, can appear ruthlessly strategic in nature, also represents an attempt to
liberate online subjects from the need to self-promote in order to gain validation from others. This intricate politics of instrumentality in some ways mirrors the irresolvable tension between fantasy and realised desire that hook-up apps seem to thrive on. Subjects do not necessarily concentrate on drawing others towards them, but may use concise, at times esoteric, language that facilitates the scattering of the self amongst scores of online peers, an act which realistically may never result in real-life interactions but allows users to enact certain fantasies within the confines of the digital sphere. That users can remain utterly unidentifiable throughout such interactions further challenges anti-neoliberal arguments regarding instrumentality. This is because anonymity facilitates relationships utterly devoid of competitive considerations such as how choice of sexual partner may (or may not) reflect well on oneself. As Greg Goldberg succinctly puts it, non-disclosure of one’s personal attributes is in some ways liberatory as ‘it may be intolerance of otherness that leads us to demand that our partners reveal their desires, secrets and fetishes so that we might manage them. Instrumentality, in turn, may beget rather than foreclose openness to otherness’ (9).

Ultimately, therefore, the MSM hook-up application inhabits a liminal, unsettled position within the political economic sphere. While the neoliberal subjectivities it encourages are incontrovertible, its potential to subvert deeply held tenets of neoliberal ideology troubles this reading, revealing a tension that I am content to leave unresolved. Indeed, to do otherwise would be to ignore or reduce the often-paradoxical nature of info-liberalism that Bison’s characters grapple with throughout the play.

Whilst Philpott’s aforementioned quote may, understandably, suggest otherwise, Alyson Campbell, who directed the original 2009 production of Bison, identifies the political ambiguity of instrumentality as a central theme of the play, noting that the figures in Bison
do not fit the neoliberal profile, or reproduce representations, of the desirable, commercially viable gay. In a period when homonormativity is inscribed as a liberatory strategy, Philpott critiques notions of a homogenous, unitary gay male sexuality/subjectivity, and offers, ultimately, a “queerworld” in which the subjectivities staged are imperfect, multiple, conflicted and endlessly shifting. (Campbell, ‘From Bogeyman to Bison’ 209)

Indeed, it is this very ambiguity and portrayal of gay male subjectivity as something polysemic and protean that frustrates what Dion Kagan describes as the ‘positive images’ of gay men generated by neoliberal ideology. Kagan identifies the accelerative move towards a neoliberal norm during the ‘post-crisis’ era as something that has inculcated a homonormative ideology within contemporary gay communities and wider culture, recapitulating a body of recent scholarship deriding cultural products that ‘portray gay men as squeaky clean, asexual or monogamous, life- and love-affirming’ (10). Certainly, Philpott avoids censoring Bison’s characters under the aegis of a ‘good gay’ image, seemingly impervious to such destructive neoliberal imperatives. However, the play also troubles the very idea that such imperatives exist, retaining a staunchly ambivalent approach to the ways in which it negotiates and navigates neoliberal ideology. By exposing the complex architecture of online cruising apps, Philpott’s play avoids totally eschewing apparently homonormative practices such as marriage or cohabitation (Richard is clearly devoted to his relationship, albeit a troubled one) while adopting a frank and potentially liberatory approach towards the world of contemporary cruising, thereby undercutting tired anti-neoliberal critique.

Of course, the politics of such an ambivalent approach begs the question of how it was received by the public. Of the few reviews that were written of both productions, their overriding focus is on the ‘braveness’ of those involved in Bison’s creation, with
Culture Northern Ireland marking it out as ‘a play which fearlessly presents something of what it is to be a contemporary gay man, warts and all, and dares us to flinch’ (Nawaz), and critic Robert Shore describing it as an ‘unflinchingly frank play’ that provides ‘a disconcertingly graphic account of fisting and other edgy sexual delights’ (Shore). By homing in on the apparently fearless and ‘risky’ elements of the play, these critics, knowingly or not, draw attention to its uncomfortable place within a neoliberal society obsessed with appearance, status and success. Indeed, the ‘warts’ alluded to by one critic are not necessarily references to any bodily defect experienced by the actors or their characters. Rather, the word is a metaphor for the abject nature of non-normative sexual acts under an enduring neoliberal ideology that favours monogamy, heterosexuality and reproduction over alternative, queer ways of living. This abjection and distance from the familial are examined at length in Henning Bech’s sociological study When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity (1997), which draws distinct connections between modern urban spaces and the gay experience. For Bech, the moment a gay man steps out of the social familial world to ‘find himself’, he necessarily gravitates towards the city, a place full of strangers and sexual potential:

one cannot help but notice them, see them, perceive signals from them – and be noticed, seen, send out signals. A unique social world; it unites within itself distance and closeness, anonymity and involvement: you can drown in the crowd and remain yourself; you can be together with others yet free of them, and free to them. (98)

The city is a space where the perceived ‘wrongness’ of homosexuality, as Bech often puts it, is able to covertly exist and elude punishment. Roach updates this argument to suit the digital world. By comparing the online hook-up forum to urban cruising spaces, it follows that any attempt to portray the mechanisms of media such as Grindr onstage
is fated to clash with neoliberal preferences for ‘squeaky-clean’, monogamous gay men uninterested in anonymous sex. At the same time, however, the play’s characters do not totally reject historically heteronormative ideals and, as demonstrated by the way in which Bison nods towards individualism and responsibility in regard to HIV transmission prevention, even a resolutely anti-neoliberal third-generation play is susceptible to the very ideology it attacks. Consequently, navigating the nexus of ways in which neoliberalism affects and configures digital hook-up culture and safe sex negotiation throws up multiple paradoxes deep-rooted in info-liberalism.

In more popular or widely viewed attempts at presenting digital cruising and sexual negotiation onstage, such antinomies are even starker. Patrick Cash’s The HIV Monologues (2016), for example, which found critical success after runs at London’s Ace Hotel and 503 Theatre, as well as various queer events and medical conferences, paints a particularly damning picture of the commodity culture associated with the online dating world while perpetuating certain neoliberal tenets surrounding responsibility. The play follows the lives of four characters affected and linked by the HIV epidemic in some way and is comprised entirely of their monologues. Perhaps inevitably, the two young gay men that make up the cast of characters are avid users of dating apps and social media such as Tinder, Hornet and Facebook, and relate their various experiences with these platforms to the audience. Nick, for example, who has recently been diagnosed with HIV, appears to have a destructive relationship with digital media, recounting how a post-gym session leads to him taking a hundred topless selfies in the changing room mirror. I then spend twenty minutes agonising over them, until I choose one for my Facebook profile picture […] The comments say: “marry me”,
“perfect”, “dreamboat”. I begin to feel wanted, until suddenly I think: would they still say that, if they knew? (Cash 26)

Indeed, each iteration of compliments such as “dreamboat” represents a kind of digital currency; an incremental boost to Nick’s online reputation and self-esteem. His intrusive thoughts about his HIV status in this scene reveal concerns that seropositivity may cost such a reputation. Later, we learn that the ‘profile picture has soared past two hundred likes now. I scroll through all those names, all those identikit topless profile pictures, all those clicks of validations, and I feel blank’ (Cash 28). There are similarities between Nick’s online experiences and Richard’s in Bison in that both appear to treat the social networking interface with an ironic distance, deriving from it little more than validation or, in Richard’s case, distraction from an absent lover. The difference in form, however, affects how we might read their respective scenes. On the one hand, the fast-paced dialogue of Bison shifts constantly between Richard and his nameless, ultimately fungible interlocutors, and is thus reflective of the scattered interface Roach describes in his apt soup can analogy. Although audience members are clearly exhorted to consider the dark side of info-liberalism, they are also granted tacit access to the nuanced architecture of the online gay dating world through Philpott’s anti-realist dramaturgy, encouraging them to look beyond the idea that apps such as Grindr are simply ‘meat markets’ and consider wider issues related to gay sexual subjectivity. As Campbell notes,

Philpott’s queer dramaturgical strategies […] ensure that he does not offer “solutions” in the form of an idealized […] gay masculinity. While it seems somehow contradictory to want to raise awareness of the presence and dangers of HIV/AIDS and yet stage ambiguous sexual subjectivities, it is imperative to avoid the
same old representational economies of good gays and bad queers.

(Campbell, ‘From Bogeyman to Bison’ 209)

By contrast, the monologue form that is so foundational to *The HIV Monologues* necessitates that all of Nick’s online activity is mediated and recounted by Nick himself. In this way, the audience is privy only to his feelings about how the commodifying elements of social media have detrimentally affected his conception of himself and his positive status. Indeed, such a caustic indictment of the online hook-up forum combined with Nick’s testimonial-style delivery gives his speech a pedagogical edge, perhaps offering up some of the ‘solutions’ that Philpott attempts to avoid without paying heed to the liberatory potential that inheres within social technologies. That *The HIV Monologues* has served a number of educational functions such as facilitating post-show Q&As with sexual health experts and headlining the British HIV Association (BHIVA) World AIDS Day Event in 2017 lends institutional backing to this rather one-dimensional depiction of technology’s potential for harm and places it in tacit agreement with mainstream medical discourses. While, as a number of laudatory critics have noted, *The HIV Monologues* comprehensively lays out many of the issues facing HIV sufferers today and ‘eloquently addresses the need for continued education and understanding, even within the gay community’ (Vale), it is necessarily bound to neoliberal imperatives surrounding self-preservation and individual responsibility. The play’s pedagogical drive inevitably curtails scope for exploration and interrogation of gay male sexual subjectivities that fall outside of ‘morally acceptable’, individualist sexual health dictates adopted by society’s ‘good gays’ as Kagan or Campbell would have it, including the counterhegemonic potentialities that inhere within digital technology.
Ultimately, the politics of presenting gay hook-up apps onstage is incredibly involuted, and anti-neoliberal critiques of gay online hook-up culture are rife with contradiction. As Goldberg notes, for example, the similarities between Grindr interfaces and e-commerce sites such as Amazon are ‘so obvious that enumerating them would belabor the point’ (253). While online hook-up culture may be easy to critique from an anti-neoliberal standpoint, the brazen conspicuousness of such similarities can be read as an acknowledgement of this fact on the part of users and app developers themselves. Rather than a celebration of commodity culture, Grindr and other cruising apps may be seen as a liberatory tool for gay men hoping to embrace non-normative sexualities that fly in the face of what Kagan dubs ‘positive images’.

Third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, then, as a phenomenon that emerged in line with the nascence of the Web 2.0 economy, is well-placed to explore the complex relationship between hook-up apps and neoliberal society. Whether such ambivalence and complexity can satisfy commercial theatre audiences without falling into the traps of moralism, contradiction or self-censorship, however, perhaps remains to be seen.

Promises, pledges and shoestring budgets: Crowdfunding HIV/AIDS theatre in a post-crash economy

Having examined the ways in which the neoliberal Web 2.0 economy has transformed sexual practices and hook-up culture in relation to HIV/AIDS and, by extension, their portrayal in third-generation theatre, I turn my attention to how the new digital landscape has inaugurated new fundraising tools for theatrical institutions to exploit. Although the link between app culture and online funding models may at first appear a little tenuous, particularly to readers ensconced in a diverse digital ecosystem
affecting their lives in many seemingly unrelated ways, I want to underscore how the protean digital terrain of the new millennium has exacted a simultaneity of pressures on the HIV/AIDS genre that simply did not exist throughout the first- and second-generational years. From the proliferation of apps to the pervasive influence of social media platforms in public and private discourse, it would be difficult to overstate the extent to which online connectivity has shaped the texture of our daily lives, as well as the ways in which capitalist exploitation operates in the twenty-first century. To this extent, the digital revolution has affected not just the content and focus of much third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre, but has profoundly altered the market economy in which the institution of theatre operates. As we will examine, the content of plays and their funding models are not necessarily discrete issues: the logic of crowdfunding produces relations between theatre-makers and funders that may compel the former to censor, simplify, desexualise or alter their creative work. As such, the swift development and adoption of internet technologies (and their interaction with neoliberal market forces) has played a significant role in the evolution of HIV/AIDS theatre in the twenty-first century.

On a general level, the inauguration of Web 2.0 spawned new economic possibilities in the Western world including the free sharing of data, knowledge and goods, thereby facilitating the inception of what are now called the online sharing and gift economies. The scope of the sharing economy is very broad, and basically encompasses any economic activity that takes place online involving the sharing of goods and services, or, in the case of the gift economy (which is generally thought to fall under the sharing economy bracket), does not operate on a *quid pro quo* basis. Examples include the development of open-source software, open-access publishing, peer-to-peer lending platforms or crowdfunding websites. Indeed, crowdfunding –
which involves the online collection of donations to fund a project or venture – has had a marked impact on the ways in which certain theatre productions, particularly those on the fringes of the mainstream, are funded and produced in the twenty-first century. In the realm of HIV/AIDS theatre, several new plays have managed to secure a platform and an audience thanks to the donations of crowdfunders. Examples include Neil Watkins’ *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2010), the GHP Collective’s *The Gay Heritage Project* (2013), and Shaun Kitchener’s *Positive* (2015), a British production that first gained exposure at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and will provide a focus for the latter half of this chapter. To help untangle the ways in which the incipient sharing economy has shaped the institution of theatre over the past couple of decades, it is important to understand how the economic state of the arts in the twenty-first century compares to that of the past. As I will primarily be examining the crowdfunding phenomenon through the lens of a British play, the discussion that follows will centre primarily on the UK economy and funding structures. However, while there are, of course, variations in the proportion of public to private funding between different countries (the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] in the US, for example, is known for being particularly paltry compared to its European equivalents [Gummow]), I claim that the motivating factors driving the rise of crowdfunding are the same transnationally. Generally speaking, playwrights and performance artists across the West have been faced with a leaner public funding environment since the dawn of the new millennium compared to that of the latter decades of the twentieth century, something that pioneers of digital technologies have been addressing through crowdfunding platforms. At the same time, however, the ever-tightening grip of neoliberal ideology is driving the rise of what could be termed the ‘consumer-
philanthropist’, a person who donates to artistic endeavours seemingly out of pure generosity while expecting a particular reward or gift in return.

As Jen Harvie explains in *Fair Play: Arts, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013), public funding has been the backbone of the arts sector in the UK ever since the post-WWII welfare state installed the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946, signalling an ideological commitment to supporting its citizenry’s participation in, and access to, the arts through public funding. Despite this, however, Harvie emphasises the fact that the country’s public funding has undergone extensive cuts as a result of the 2007 economic crisis and the UK’s election of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, which put a number of austerity measures into action. As a result of cuts, Arts Council England (ACE) and the government have been campaigning for arts institutions to seek new sources of funding and adopt what Dame Liz Forgan, the Chair of ACE between 2009 and 2013 describes as ‘the three-legged stool that supports the arts: public funding, private funding and commercial income’ (qtd. in Harvie 151-2).

As a result of this economic model, scores of cash-strapped theatre companies, producers and playwrights have been faced with the task of securing private funding in the wake of a global recession. Whilst private donations from corporations and moneyed philanthropists were a feature of funding structures in the arts long before the financial struggles of the twenty-first century, theatre professionals have had to rely on these sorts of handouts to a far greater extent in recent years thanks to hefty cuts in public spending. Crowdfunding platforms, therefore, have partly come about in response to this situation.

Kickstarter is one such crowdfunding site. Between its founding in April 2009 and December 2019, a total of $41.68 million has been channelled into 12,137 theatre
projects worldwide, indicating a high level of motivation amongst its users to help bring under-funded projects to the stage (Kickstarter). Users of the site are given the option to pledge sums of money to a creative project in return for (largely symbolic) rewards. Those who donated £10 or more to *Positive*, for example, were offered recognition on social media, progress rehearsal updates and a copy of the script; those who donated £20 or more were offered all of these rewards as well as a ticket to the performance of their choice; and donors who pledged over £50 were offered two complementary tickets for a performance of their choice, a signed copy of the script and a personalised recorded song of thanks. Of course, one of the main questions to emerge out of the crowdfunding phenomenon is why participants choose to donate money, however small the sum, in return for rewards that have a much lower market value (if any). Indeed, excluding donors who face social pressures seemingly extraneous to market logic such as friends and family, crowdfunders appear to subvert the core neoliberal tenet of profitability and self-interest, suggesting that their motivations lie within prosocial rather than individualistic realms. In the context of HIV/AIDS theatre, then, donating could indicate a desire to help theatre makers disseminate information about HIV/AIDS and reduce associated stigma amongst a theatregoing public, something that has, to varying degrees, been a central element of the genre since its inception. The rubric of Kitchener’s Kickstarter page for *Positive*, for example, certainly appears to cater to this kind of sentiment:

HIV is a thing. It's a thing that isn't necessarily as scary a thing as it once was but it's certainly a bigger thing than you may well think it is. You with me?

*Positive* is a play about Benji. He's in his mid-twenties, and he's an ordinary chap trying to make his way through life, love and all that malarkey in modern-day Britain. He is also one of 100,000
people living in this country right now with HIV (or at least he would be if he wasn't fictional). (Kitchener)

Kitchener’s conversational tone and gentle probing of his readers (‘You with me?’) seemingly demonstrates an attempt to build a collaborative relationship with funders. At its starkest level, such rubric is designed to appeal to the charitable, prosocial sensibilities of crowdfunding website users interested in contributing towards a project that raises awareness of the contemporary realities of HIV, particularly those who may be shocked by some of the statistics provided.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, examining the fundraising page for Positive through the lens of info-liberalism rather complicates this one-dimensional reading of crowdfunding motivations. If, as everyday neoliberal ideology dictates, individuals are essentially entrepreneurial entities by default, then the practice of crowdfunding is ostensibly illogical. As such, it must be undergirded by a deeper nexus of reciprocities and motivations. The inchoate body of scholarly work on crowdfunding and the sharing economy, typically emerging from the fields of sociology or the digital humanities and highly influenced by the work of French sociologist Marcel Mauss, certainly seems to support this notion (see, for example, André et al.). Mauss’s most famous work, *The Gift* (1925), may serve as a strong theoretical framework through which to analyse the motivations of the crowdfunder in its stipulation that all gifts are loaded with obligations, social bonds and reciprocities. The gift is the ‘present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest’ (Mauss 4). As such, no gift is truly ‘free’, and crowdfunding is beleaguered by self-interest on both sides of the equation. Although Mauss’s theories were espoused in the early twentieth century, far before the inception of Web 2.0, in
many ways they have only been further corroborated by the public forum of the internet. As Mary Douglas explains in the foreword to a 1990 edition of *The Gift*, Maussian theory stipulates that the

gift cycle echoes Adam Smith’s invisible hand: gift complements market in so far as it operates where the latter is absent. Like the market it supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges. Gifts are given in the context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market. (xviii)

The internet, then, as a public forum that can be accessed from almost anywhere in the world at any time, serves to heighten this sense of ‘public esteem’ when it comes to crowdfunding. As demonstrated by Kitchener’s entreaty, rewards come not in the form of material gain (only scripts and tickets are offered), but in the form of clout, approbation and personal promotion (i.e. social media mentions). If, as explored earlier in this chapter, self-branding and promotion are central to the cultivation of an entrepreneurial, neoliberal self, then ostensibly altruistic contributions to crowdfunded projects can be problematised by the spectre of self-interest. Furthermore, the spatio-temporal architecture of Web 2.0 is also such that the ‘public drama’ of gift-giving has a certain kind of permanence; it is recorded and can be accessed again and again, meaning crowdfunders’ public esteem can be reaffirmed inexhaustibly. In this way, then, while altruism may play at least some part in their reasons for donating to theatre projects online, the neoliberal environment they navigate means their motives are ineluctably shackled to the lure of public recognition. Certainly, the notion that crowdfunders are largely driven by public acknowledgement and esteem is backed up
by the prevailing market research surrounding theatre funding. In a study of 875 Kickstarter-funded theatre projects established between 2011 and 2014, researchers found that the ‘propensity to donate is greater when the entrepreneur offers public acknowledgement without material rewards; it is weakest when no rewards are offered at all’ (Boeuf et al. 42). Furthermore, ‘material rewards have a negative influence on the number of crowdfunders who choose to support a project in cases where public acknowledgement is offered’ (Boeuf et al. 42). Although the authors of this research posited their findings as evidence of prosocial behaviour, the fact that material rewards have a _negative_ impact on funding surely demonstrates that many crowdfunders harbour concerns about the potentially reputation-damaging effect of accepting such rewards. Indeed, material rewards may not carry the positive symbolic weight they are usually associated with in this context, perhaps harbouring the ominous potential to mar a person’s philanthropic image or ‘brand’.

While crowdfunding is by no means the most significant or reliable source of funding for third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre as a whole, its political effects and interaction with the political economy inevitably throw up questions about how the Web 2.0 economy is shaping the trajectory of the genre, particularly as public arts funding dwindles. Many first- and second-generation HIV/AIDS plays faced a rather different funding environment to today’s third-generation playwrights, with _Angels in America_, for example, initially reliant on NEA funding to reach the cultural stature it enjoys today. As Tony Kushner notes in a recent published oral history of the play, ‘the NEA offered this $50,000 dollar grant, and $40,000 would go to production, and $10,000 went to the playwright. That was more money than I’d ever made for anything [...] I was sort of being commissioned to write – the federal government’s commissioning me to write – a play’ (qtd. in Butler and Kois 34-5). In this way, as
explored in the introduction to this study, there was an onus on Kushner to produce something that would appeal to a wide section of the public. While *Angels* presents a critical, even caustic image of Reaganist, homophobic America during the 1980s, in many ways its calls for progress, tolerance and, perhaps, gradualism, appears to contain a kind of pluralism that aligns far more closely to hegemonic ideologies than, say, the resolutely queer, utopian politics seen in works such as Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*, which I examined in Chapter Two. Indeed, that Miller received NEA funding that was later rescinded due to the countercultural, protestatory nature of his work essentially publicised the fact that the federal establishment was in direct conflict with AIDS activists. To some extent, the virtually non-existent budget Miller had to work with served his communitarian form of performance, compelling him to seek out cheap – and thereby intimate – venues in which bonds between audience members could be nurtured. Furthermore, the unavoidably pared-back nature of his productions (props were scant and his body alone became the focal point of the work) lent certain poignancy to his testimonial monologues and served as a visual metaphor for the government’s lack of support for his cause, thereby emphasising the urgent need for political action to address the crisis. In this way, then, more than a fact of simple economics, public funding for HIV/AIDS theatre was saturated with political weight and served as a measure of the extent to which playwrights and their plays were ideologically compatible with contemporary neoliberalism.

In today’s cultural economy, of course, the urgency of the ‘crisis years’ has eased and the proportion of playwrights seeking subsidy outside of government organisations has increased, thus shifting the funding dynamics of HIV/AIDS theatre. As the virus became a chronic condition rather than a death sentence, the production of second-generation activist theatre started to wane, meaning the issue of funding was
less politically fraught and tied up with the need for political action. This lack of urgency is evident in Kitchener’s rubric for Positive, which he describes as:

A warm-hearted comedy inspired by true stories, Positive is not a dark and gloomy drama about death and disease [...] It's just an entertaining show with a few laughs, a few serious bits and the occasional reference to Britney Spears; designed to shatter the inaccurate preconceptions that A) HIV doesn't really exist in Britain anymore, and B) those who are HIV+ are somehow vastly different to those who aren't. (Kitchener)

In trivialising the seriousness or importance of his work and distancing himself from the various death-filled plays of the past (an option, perhaps, available only to playwrights of the ‘post-crisis’ era), Kitchener attends instead to cultivating a likeable, charming online voice, selling his personality as a brand of sorts in which to invest. Ultimately, while the pedagogical purpose of Positive is clearly imbued with prosocial intentions, the lack of urgency displayed in Kitchener’s rubric along with an ‘all or nothing’ funding model used by Kickstarter is evidence of an ideological gulf between second- and third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre. Indeed, Kickstarter does not give any funds to a given project if it does not reach its target goal, a quasi-competitive model that goes against the imperative ‘make do’ attitude adopted by many second-generation theatre makers driven by crisis. In this way, whilst third-generation playwrights are afforded a wider variety of funding options in the Web 2.0 century, the technologies that facilitate such opportunities may have the potential to shape the conception and success of the plays themselves. Indeed, while any claim that Positive was written and produced solely in line with the needs of consumer-philanthropists would be wild conjecture, there’s no denying that its branding and light, inoffensively humorous content sits well within a crowdfunding model. After all, as Kitchener
himself notes on his Kickstarter page, ‘[a]side from the budget, an obvious concern with taking a show to the Fringe is actually getting an audience in to see the damn thing’ (Kitchener). This throws up a number of questions about the increasing number of crowdfunded HIV/AIDS plays. Are funding models to some extent ‘mainstreaming’ the content of third-generation plays? And is the competitive element of sites such as Kickstarter creating a funding environment that closely parallels that of commerce?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the seductive, seemingly emancipatory potentialities that inhere within info-liberalism, several academics and theatre critics would answer such questions emphatically in the negative, instead championing Kickstarter as a galvanising counterhegemonic force. Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, for example, believe that

crowdfunding appears as something of an antidote to the oligopolistic concentration and centralization of capital investment, a digital economy that necessarily cuts against the grain of the mainstream and the traditional, and which has the remedial and ameliorative capacity to make funding available to individuals and institutions that would otherwise be excluded from capital allocations. (1023)

This view is supported by the increasing number of theatre-makers able to fully realise their projects by way of crowdfunding. As early as 2012, Kickstarter was already on its way to channelling more money into arts projects than the NEA in the US (Rosen), an upward trend that is reflected globally and has benefited amateur playwrights such as Kitchener. However, such a thesis is fraught with problems if we return to the idea that crowdfunding is ineluctably tied to self-interest and promotion. As Harvie explains:
Fundamentally, though crowdfunding enables individuals to act with self-determining agency in deciding what arts to choose to fund, it destabilizes mutual social responsibility. Funders are not a socially connected crowd but a crowd of individuals who act the same way; social connection is neither necessary nor necessarily achieved, despite the intimation of co-activity and potential collectivism in the word “crowd”. Crowdfunding also risks, again, legitimating the rolling back of state support for the arts by stepping in to fill its gaps. (Harvie 173)

The paradoxically isolating yet socially inclusive spatio-temporality of the internet sphere amplifies the tenets of everyday neoliberalism, then. Rather than the “crowd” operating as a cohesive community supportive of general principles, it is structured as a collection of distinct actors focused on their individual needs and desires. A funding model drained of ‘mutual social responsibility’ emulates the architecture of the neoliberal free market, leaving theatre makers with an abundance of factors to consider if they want to be successful in their funding efforts. For a genre such as HIV/AIDS theatre, this trend is particularly stifling, as playwrights appear compelled to promote their embryonic projects through the rubric of public health and pedagogy, something that goes a long way to explaining why the counterhegemonic fervour of second-generational plays faded away at the dawn of the millennium. If, as Harvie suggests, crowdfunding legitimises the decimation of public arts funding, its persistent rise is surely poised to encourage the creation of increasingly mainstream HIV/AIDS theatre that avoids the risk of critical rejection. However, as will be examined in the next chapter, as well as an attachment to info-liberalism, the genre’s third and latest generation can be characterised by a boom in solo and monologic works. Often deemed a germane genre for giving counterhegemonic forms of testimony a platform, solo performance complicates the reading of third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre as
immanently more susceptible to hegemonic influences. As such, I examine the extent to which solo practitioners are motivated and, indeed, able to subvert the constrictions of the neoliberal theatre sector.
Chapter 4: Exploring HIV/AIDS through solo performance in neoliberal times

Although this study necessarily homes in on a small subsection of HIV/AIDS-related plays and theatrical works performed after 1992, I am keen to emphasise that the genre is thematically diverse, addressing topics including, but not limited to, safe sex practices, chemsex, legal issues related to HIV transmission, S/M practices, the history of HIV/AIDS, and political issues surrounding the memorialisation of the epidemic’s early years. Whilst this diversity means that the plays evade neat thematic categorisation, a clear trend has nonetheless emerged regarding the formal elements of second- and third-generation theatre. Indeed, a striking portion of HIV/AIDS plays and performances performed after 1992 have been monologic or solo pieces, designed to be performed by a single actor, often in relatively intimate settings. Many have been autobiographical or testimonial in nature, such as Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* (1992), analysed in Chapter Two of this study. Others have been verbatim or testimonial accounts performed by single actors, such as Alexis Gregory’s *Riot Act* (2018).

According to research carried out by a number of scholars and performance practitioners in recent years, the evident correlation between solo performance and queer culture is no coincidence. In Deirdre Heddon’s *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), for example, Heddon notes that the links between autobiographical solo performance and queerness can be traced back to a political desire to resist marginalisation and claim agency within a heteronormative and heterosexist society. ‘Autobiographical performances,’ she writes, ‘provide a way to talk out, talk back, talk otherwise. Here, the marginalised subject can literally take centre stage’ (3). Similarly, in the dialogic introduction to Holly Hughes’ and David Román’s anthology of queer monologic works, *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (1998), the pair discuss...
possible reasons for the proliferation of the genre in the US. Hughes argues that, as well as providing impecunious artists with an affordable platform in a scantly funded industry, solo performance is historically entwined with the country’s social change movements. Certainly, this view is exemplified by Hughes’ own autobiographical work *Clit Notes* (1996), in which the artist wryly speaks out against her own marginalisation at the hands of both homophobic family members and national institutions such as the NEA. Expanding on this point in a conversation with Hughes, Román states that the trend is indicative of a distinctly queer desire for identity and community. He argues that ‘queer solo performers trouble the comfort of community even as they invest in it […] One could even argue that queer solo performers are often at the frontiers of new social identities and more inclusive community formations’ (qtd. in Hughes and Román 5-6).

What ties Heddon’s, Hughes’ and Román’s assertions together, then, is an acknowledgement of the role of so-called ‘community’ in solo performance – specifically, queer community. Although the notion of community is fairly polysemic and only Román explicitly uses it, the scholars clearly gesture towards its reparative conceptualisation as a space for similarly identified or politically affiliated individuals to resist their own oppression by the forces of prevailing hegemony. Heddon’s claim that autobiographical performance offers historically marginalised artists the opportunity to ‘talk out’ and ‘talk back’ to an audience, for example, suggests that the form facilitates a quasi-reciprocal (rather than merely presentational) performer-spectator relationship. She goes on to assert that ‘to be part of an audience is potentially to be allied with others’, a communal relationship reinforced by solo performance’s often conversational mode of address, as well as a call to establish political affiliations grounded in common experiences of oppression (6). Indeed, solo theatre’s potential to
inspire dialogue may indicate why the form has proved so popular amongst performers affiliated with marginalised identity groups: it feeds into motivations to initiate conversation and action surrounding political injustices. Such a desire is particularly acute for groups affected by HIV/AIDS. As Monica Pearl notes in *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (2013), a common trait in the art and literature of the AIDS crisis is a preoccupation with conversation and its potential to structure so-called ‘queer filiations’ or ‘network[s] of friends and chosen families’ or, indeed, what we might term ‘communities’ (150). Citing examples as wide-ranging as the ACT UP Oral History Project, Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* (1999) and performance installations by the likes of Ron Athey and Lois Weaver, Pearl identifies these works as presenting ‘disordered and continuous exchanges and dialogues [that] consolidate community through sustaining loss’ (160). In other words, the myriad losses that have been incurred by queer individuals since the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic – such as the loss of friends or lovers, the loss of somatic agency, or the loss of familial ties as a result of phobic rejection – may serve as generative sites of queer kinship and, by extension, political power. Indeed, Pearl identifies the loss of acceptance within normative society as a particularly community-building force, noting that ‘outcasts can aspire to be included and recognized by claiming insider or normative status, or else not by repudiating the status of outcast but claiming *community* outcast status’ (163).

Despite the clear potential for solo performance to inspire this kind of dialogue and communal bonding, however, there appears to be a lacuna in the scholarly literature addressing twenty-first-century solo HIV/AIDS plays (and, indeed, queer solo performance more broadly). That is, assertions that theatre-based community formation is necessarily counterhegemonic often fail to acknowledge that theatrical
institutions are still embedded within the anatomy of capitalist hegemony. Whilst Hughes rightly notes that cash-strapped artists often go to great lengths to fight institutional barriers and get their work on stage, the vast majority still consent to and work within the logic of competition and profit. This chapter, therefore, will interrogate the ways in which the rather nebulous notion of theatrical community-building operates for third-generational HIV/AIDS solo performers forced to navigate an increasingly neoliberal world. That communal bonds are (at least to some extent) built, nurtured and shaped by solo performers and the institution of theatre is not in question here. Rather, I aim to tease out the political limitations of an imagined queer community constructed by notionally counterhegemonic performance artists still inextricably enmeshed within everyday neoliberalism. To do so, I will analyse the ways in which some post-millennial solo plays and performances addressing HIV/AIDS often critique dominant capitalistic ideologies whilst simultaneously consenting to (sometimes even promoting) the tenets of neoliberal politics through a new rubric of ‘community-building’. By extension, I will explore how certain third-generational playwrights are becoming aware of – and starting to address – this apparent paradox. Miranda Joseph’s study Against the Romance of Community (2002) will provide much of the critical and theoretical grounding for this chapter. In her work, Joseph combines ethnographic research with political theory to make the case that the contemporary notion of community as a coalition of interrelated individuals that lies outside of – or stands counter to – wider hegemonic structures is both idealistic and blind to the role that capitalism plays in discursive articulations of community. She argues ‘against the idea that communities are organic, natural, spontaneous occurrences,’ instead claiming that the discourse of community has been increasingly adopted to bolster corporate endeavours in an age of free market fundamentalism, with
communal subjectivity often constituted by the capitalist practices of production and consumption (viii). The more communities an individual (or consumer) is able to identify with, therefore, the greater the potential for corporate gain. As Joseph puts it, the attempt to appeal to communitarian notions of multiculturalism and diversity has shifted from being a tool of nonprofits and educational institutions to one embraced by corporations, allowing them to subsume broad desires for sociality into capitalist practices: ‘diversity discourse deploys existing differences and elaborates new ones as occasions for the voluntary and enthusiastic participation of subjects as niched or individuated producers and consumers’ (Joseph 22). Within the institution of theatre, therefore, which is by no means immune to corporatism, community-oriented projects aimed at particular so-called ‘demographics’ may reveal distinctly neoliberal imperatives.

In the first half of this chapter, I focus on the ways in which a performance venue famed for its history of queer solo work – London’s Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) – instantiates the kind of uncritical approach to community Joseph has identified. Through close analysis of an HIV/AIDS-related solo piece performed at the venue by legendary queer solo artist David Hoyle in 2007, as well as analysis of the venue organisers’ relationship with their audience, I untangle the various ways in which the RVT is governed by neoliberal structures and imperatives. As will be explored, the venue’s response to a recent threat of closure has been particularly revealing of its acquiescence to a capitalistic form of rhetoric, seen, for example, in its owners’ calls for queer-identified individuals to become ‘shareholders’ in the building. In the second half of the chapter, I will move on to investigate the ways in which Neil Watkins, a solo performer who frequently addresses HIV/AIDS, pushes back against the idea of community-building as an unimpeachable force for political progression by upending
the traditional spectator-performer relationship. More specifically, I will analyse his hybrid slam poetry play *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2010). First performed in 2010 at Dublin’s Queer Notions Festival, the work explores the day-to-day life of a recently diagnosed HIV-positive man coping with a life of financial precarity in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Watkins (or, more precisely, the character with whom he shares his name) does not explicitly address the audience during the play and experiments with different voices and conversational modes, at certain points presenting the audience with only one side of a dialogue. In so doing, he subverts the conversational and testimonial modes of direct address traditionally associated with solo HIV/AIDS performances, pessimistically questioning the function of contemporary articulations of community in a country he sees as marred by increased atomisation and ‘forty shades/Of shame’ (Watkins 316). In this way, I make the case that Watkins’ work is indicative of third-generational HIV/AIDS theatre’s need to grapple with a political moment characterised by a form of neoliberal ideology more pervasive than any of its previous renderings, despite growing concerns about its clearly destructive power.

**Solo performance, community, and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern**

Before delving deeper into the RVT’s negotiation with community, it will be useful to elucidate why Joseph believes the concept to be so problematic within the realm of theatre. Putting her work in conversation with that of queer performance scholars and practitioners such as Hughes, Román or Heddon muddies some of the clear-cut conclusions that posit the institution of theatre as a ‘natural’ facilitator of communal relations, as well as representations of community as unequivocally ‘good’ or
‘progressive.’ Against the Romance of Community features an in-depth ethnographic study of Theatre Rhinoceros, a non-profit gay and lesbian theatre company based in San Francisco that was founded in 1977 to provide LGBTQ-identifying performers with a platform for their work and to ‘diversify’ the city’s theatrical offerings. Having spent time behind the scenes observing meetings involving the company’s artistic directors and board members in the early 1990s, however, Joseph asserts that we should be suspicious of such claims to diversity and inclusivity. Indeed, she describes an atmosphere of so-called ‘homosexism’ in the meetings: a ‘prioritization of gayness over other identity features’ that saw company members subordinating the work of bisexual playwrights or, indeed, any plays that did not fit in to their ideal notions of (primarily white and male) gay theatre (xvii). Noting that both artistic directors had actually assumed the job titles of gay men who had been struck down by AIDS, Joseph explains that,

Adele [Prandini] and Doug [Holsclaw] gained a great deal of authority by inscribing themselves into the traumatic and oppressed history of the theatre and community. It was Doug’s habitual role in staff meetings to recall and defend the way things had always been done. And throughout [one such] meeting, both Doug and Adele were able to represent the needs and desires of ‘the community’ in a way that trumped all other suggestions. (xiii)

As evidenced by Joseph’s interviews with frequenters of the venue, conducted around 1991, ‘the way things had always been done’ pertained to the stories of relatively well-off white gay men living in San Francisco. Whilst Prandini emphasised her supposed ambitions to include new and diverse voices in the theatre’s annual programme, the stories of these men were seen as what its community desired and therefore, presumably, the theatre’s primary income generators. In order to intervene in what was
clearly a hierarchy privileging certain voices in the theatre, its artistic directors set up an initiative to encourage ‘diversity’. However, as Joseph explains, its success was very much reliant on rigidifying and strengthening the identitarian hierarchies it was supposedly pushing against:

> The development project involved the linked political and economic goals of forging a multicultural gay community and creating work of quality (and cost) that would be equivalent to that found in mainstream theater. These goals were linked through a series of programs that were intended to do both things at once. But such “development” depended on contributions from the gay community, contributions from artists of their work, and contributions from audience members through their subscriptions and financial donations. Adele thus cast the development programs as themselves gifts to the community in relation to which the community should reciprocate. (106)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the audience members who had the financial means to contribute to the programme were precisely ‘those white gay men who had been the primary addressees of the theater’s productions over the years’ and whose continued representation onstage was essentially, therefore, secured through gift donations (Joseph 107).

As explained in Chapter Three via Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift exchange, these kinds of philanthropic gifts are very much implicated in neoliberal ideology despite their apparent generosity. In some ways, the diversity initiatives such as the one put forward by Theatre Rhinoceros presaged the crowdfunding phenomenon, creating trade-based relationships between community patrons and artists that were entrenched in self-interest and, by extension, everyday neoliberalism. Within the context of Theatre Rhinoceros’s diversity programme, patrons’ ‘rewards’ took the form of
licences to promote and ‘articulate an already-achieved gay subjectivity’ that restricts and rigidifies the boundaries of the theatre community itself (Joseph 109). Indeed, this motivation is aptly articulated by one of Joseph’s interview subjects, who viewed the theatre as a valuable place for him and his partner to formulate a community of people ‘like us’. In other words, his donations gave him access to people who were similarly culturally engaged:

We had dinner with two women couples last Saturday night. One of the women is a member of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She loves to sing, she loves to go to the movies. We love to go to the movies. She loves to eat, we love to eat. And I guess we’re sort of middle-of-the-road people. Neither one of us is flamboyantly nellie or outrageously butch. The women friends that we have would be acceptable in any company. (qtd. in Joseph 108-9)

The idea of ‘acceptability’ articulated here is indicative of a kind of resistance to forms of queer subjectivity that stray too far from the mainstream. Indeed, the subject appears to value the fact that he and his friends live assimilative and ‘middle-of-the-road’ lives that give them access to the esteemed company of a member of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. This betrays an elitism that clearly grates against Prandini’s purportedly ‘multicultural’ aims. Joseph’s ethnographic research, therefore, is helpful in revealing how theatre communities are tacitly shaped by the power of money and prevailing hegemony. Although Theatre Rhinoceros has always been a non-profit organisation, the money it needs to survive is inextricably tied to donors’ individual interests owing to the self-serving impetus of everyday neoliberal hegemony.

Of course, Theatre Rhinoceros is by no means a one-off phenomenon within the field of queer theatre. Countless other venues around the world face similar tensions
when it comes to the apparent communities that develop around them. Take London’s RVT, for example. Whilst I am unable to offer the kind of all-access ethnography described above, there is much to be gleaned about the relationship between queer solo performance and community by examining the venue’s artistic output, as well as its attempts to reach out to current and prospective punters via marketing and fundraising campaigns. Hailed variously as the ‘birthplace for a lot of alternative queer talent’ (Lyons) and ‘a symbol of tolerance and alternative entertainment’ (Brown, M.), the RVT is a hybrid pub/club/performance space that has long been considered a bastion of subcultural art. Indeed, the fact that the venue primarily hosts an array of drag, cabaret and solo performances inscribes it within a genealogy of fringe and subcultural queer theatre that – to some extent at least – pushes against the elitism and corporatism of the mainstream. As Stephen Farrier notes, the ‘club or cabaret setting is a key place for queer performance (though not as thoroughly studied as productions for more formal stages) in that it engages with an audience in ways that, perhaps, mainstream theatre tends not to’ (‘Re-Membering AIDS’ 155). Neil Bartlett, a playwright and seasoned performer at the RVT, characterises this unusual mode of audience engagement as very much dependent on a solo performer’s ability to cut through a disorderly crowd uninhibited by the social conventions required by traditional theatre venues. He notes of the RVT’s punters, for example, that:

Although they feature a fair number of arty types, and are noticeably more mixed gender-wise than your average Vauxhall gay venue, they’re there for a good Saturday night out, with beer, chat and dancing to the raucous pop smash-up of the house DJs, the lovely Readers’ Wives, coming first, and the performance turns coming second. It’s no good coming on respectable; anyone who takes the mike at the Vauxhall has to either charm or stun the crowd into bestowing their attention in the very first minute. (14)
The fact that the venue’s punters are permitted – perhaps even expected – to engage in conversations whilst performances are occurring is exemplary of Heddon’s notion that to be part of an audience is to be in alliance with others. In part, it is this apparent community spirit that has allowed the RVT to cultivate a reputation as one of the UK’s oldest and most inclusive queer performance venues and, by extension, a go-to spot for HIV/AIDS-related initiatives and campaigns. The RVT has been home to a number of annual World AIDS Day performances and fundraisers, for example, and in February 2016 provided a launch venue for ACT UP London’s ‘Silence = Infection’ campaign, which aimed to tackle the criminalisation of homosexuality around the world in a bid to curb growing HIV infection rates and stigma (ACT UP London).

Despite this apparently communal and counterhegemonic set-up, however, the RVT is still yoked to neoliberal imperatives in similar ways to that of Theatre Rhinoceros. Indeed, although the (somewhat raucous) experiences the RVT offers audience members are very different to those of the more traditional Theatre Rhinoceros, its claims to community principles and diversity are remarkably similar. On its website, for example, the RVT espouses similar values to those Prandini hoped to embrace, emphasising the organisers’ desire ‘to engage with the diverse mix of people who continue to use the venue and want to engage and support the diversity we believe in,’ a clear attempt to employ some of the ‘diversity’ axioms of community-building discourse described earlier in this chapter (The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, ‘Membership’). However, the community-building power of this kind of inclusive parlance is somewhat eroded by the venue’s individualised rules for acceptable forms of spectatorship found elsewhere on the site. For example, on a page entitled ‘Code of Conduct’, it is stated that ‘RVT customers are encouraged that when using the venue, to enjoy what the venue has to offer you, with our hospitality, atmosphere and
entertainment levels of service [sic] within a competitive service led industry’ (The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, ‘Code of Conduct’). By emphasising precisely what customers have to gain from the venue – as well as boasting competitive levels of service – the RVT characterises its punters as neoliberal rationalists. Rather than simply turning up to the tavern to enjoy subcultural solo performances and nurture communitarian bonds, audience members are seen to be primarily concerned with the ‘cost-effectiveness’ of their visit compared to other venues operating within the industry. Of course, under this kind of neoliberal rubric, the spectator-venue relationship must remain quid pro quo: the same webpage states that ‘We ask you to respect how the venue is managed and operated. Please respect our property, our staff, our customers, our DJ’s [sic] and our promoters’ (The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, ‘Code of Conduct’). The repetitive use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ serves to emphasise the separation between the venue as a commercial entity and the individual customer, a form of individualisation that perpetuates notions surrounding responsibility that, as explored in previous chapters, typify everyday neoliberalism. Such calls for respect also suggest that respect is something to be earned, rather than something we may take for granted, again betraying the ways in which everyday neoliberalism marketises aspects of human experience once untouched by commerce. Whilst it should be acknowledged that venue managers may require conduct rules to protect patrons from harm, the customers vs. venue framework in which the RVT’s code of conduct is couched reflects a culture of liability that protects its commercial interests in a way that is hostile to the ‘inclusive community formations’ theorised by scholars of queer solo performance such as Román. Indeed, such legalistic language effectively turns the RVT into a microcosm of the wider neoliberal state within which, as Tor Krever states, the ‘law is understood as a market-oriented instrument for furthering the
economic, political, and social ends of the neoliberal project. Private property and contract, individual entrepreneurialism, and protection of foreign investors are elevated as the core concerns of the law’ (22). In this way, whilst the solo performances at the RVT may help to build communal bonds between punters, any suggestion that the audience-communities formed at such performances represent counterhegemonic forces is necessarily weakened by the venue’s corporate and atomising imperatives.

In some ways, the fact that the RVT has been subsumed into neoliberal structures is a twenty-first-century inevitability. As Raewyn Connell notes, following a Gramscian line of argument,

neoliberalism remains the common sense of our era. The debate is about how to get the market working better, not about what should replace the market. Neoliberalism is now the ground from which labour parties, conservative parties, and liberal parties all proceed.

(22)

In other words, ‘as neoliberal ideology becomes hegemonic, it becomes difficult for many people to envision alternatives’ (Luxton 64), something that has prompted a number of political thinkers to declare a so-called ‘crisis of the imagination’ (Bastani; Havien). It is this crisis, I argue, that permits the kind of neoliberal rubric on the RVT’s web pages described above to go unchallenged and ultimately compromises the potentially communitarian aims of its various solo performers. Nowhere is this compromise more clearly exhibited than in the ongoing ‘RVT Future’ campaign, which was set up in 2014 after the venue was bought by property developers, putting its future as an LGBTQ+ club and performance space under threat. The aim of ‘RVT Future’, ultimately, is to move ownership from the property developers into the hands of what campaigners nebulously term the ‘community’. In some ways, the campaign
positions itself as antithetical to neoliberal individualism, stating on its website that ‘as long as the RVT is owned by anyone led by greedy shareholders and investors, the Tavern will be under threat’ (The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, ‘How You Can Help’). The anti-neoliberal characterisation of shareholders as ‘greedy’ and therefore implicitly anti-communitarian, however, is somewhat contradicted by the investment- and enterprise-oriented lexis used in RVT Future’s campaign manifesto, which states:

We have launched a campaign to set up a Community Benefit Society which can offer the LGBTQ+ public shares in the ownership of the pub. This is a big undertaking requiring registration with the Financial Conduct Authority and the creation of a share prospectus, business plan, governance documents and a whole host of other paperwork and activities to ensure the building will be properly managed and run by the shareholding members for the LGBTQ+ community. (The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, ‘How You Can Help’)

Moving shares out of the hands of property developers through the Community Benefit Society scheme does, of course, have its merits in preventing shareholders from making purely financially driven investments. Indeed, the scheme was set up by community network organisations Locality and Co-operatives UK to help keep businesses of apparent community value afloat and prohibits shares from rising in value (although they may go down, a risk that only really allows monied individuals with plenty of spare income to invest). Instead of monetary profit, shareholders are rewarded with access to regular voting procedures, whereby they may participate in ballots pertaining to the future of the ventures in which they invest. However, whilst this financial model ostensibly eliminates the anti-communitarian imperative of profit from shareholding, the atomism of everyday neoliberalism lingers. The model RVT Future is working towards can be compared to that of Theatre Rhinoceros’s diversity
campaign, as the power to influence the future of the venue and, perhaps, its performance programme, would be spread only amongst those punters who could afford to purchase shares. The venue-owning community emergent under such plans, therefore, would be bounded by financial factors, potentially preventing otherwise willing people from getting involved in the running of the venue, and revealing the notion of an open RVT community to be, as Joseph notes, romantic. Whilst the RVT’s owners rally against corporate forces supposedly injurious to queer communal bonds, then, their strategies to combat such forces require the generation of a group that instantiates its own set of hierarchies and exclusionary mechanisms.

The ways in which the RVT is implicated within neoliberal structures has not gone unnoticed by some of its solo performers. David Hoyle, for example, an artist known for performing regularly at the venue for a number of years – often as ‘anti-drag’ queen The Divine David – has historically used his platform to critique the very institution that granted it. Hoyle’s *Magazine*, a series of solo performance works that took place at the RVT between July and September 2007 and each addressed a different (and politically loaded) topic, is exemplary of this kind of resistance from within, with one of its instalments – entitled ‘HIV ünt AIDS’ – specifically taking aim at neoliberal forms of community-based rhetoric surrounding the HIV epidemic. The show itself comprised segments of direct autobiographical address, a video of Hoyle undergoing an HIV test, and an opportunity for individual audience members to take part in on-stage conversations with the performer. As demonstrated in footage of the performance, Hoyle starts the show by immediately unsettling and subverting the venue’s reputed collective spirit as set out by Bartlett in the aforementioned quotation, noting that this is a very collective event tonight, ladies and gentleman, the emphasis very much on the “communal” [brief pause]. TOTAL
SILENCE now, please. If you wanna have chit chat or talk about what you ate last night for your tea, leave the auditorium immediately. (‘David Hoyle – HIV ünt AIDS Pt 1’ 0:14-0:39)

Hoyle’s instant switch from emphasising the communal to peremptorily insisting on the full attention of his audience highlights the problematic and, perhaps, simplistic nature of claims that solo performance is intrinsically community-building and imbued with radical potential. Indeed, the jarring interjection of ‘TOTAL SILENCE’ wittily points out to audience members that he is ultimately in control of the evening’s trajectory, thereby compromising his previous claims to communality and revealing them to be, perhaps, tokenistic.

Building on this premise, Hoyle goes on to interrogate the notion that autobiographical testimony can generate productive alliances between audience members through affective recognition and shared experience. He states:

This isn’t theatre, by the way, ladies and gentleman, this is truth. When you’re in a pantomime costume and you’re acting and you’re doing it all, of course it’s beautiful. But occasionally, truth is more important than theatre [pronounced ‘tee-a-truh’]. And I know that all of us are quite sensitive people who might have been told negative things when they were younger. And that has clouded our vision and made us feel a little bit unworthy and that maybe we should die. (‘David Hoyle – HIV ünt AIDS Pt 2’ 0:15-0:54)

Whilst Hoyle’s claim to truth may appear at first to be straight-forwardly genuine, his characteristically ironic cadences soon creep in. Hoyle’s playful mispronunciation of the word ‘theatre’ indicates that what he is saying may not be utterly sincere, and his subsequent categorisation of every audience member into a group of ‘sensitive people’ questioning whether they deserve to live affirms such suspicions. Whilst feelings of
worthlessness and suicidal thoughts may well reflect Hoyle’s own personal past experiences, the notion that all audience members have at some point felt exactly the same way is clearly farcical. As well as conveying an obviously sweeping and unqualified assertion, Hoyle uses comedic understatement to signal its absurdity, sardonically linking suicidal ideation to simply feeling ‘a little bit unworthy’. In so doing, Hoyle encourages the audience to actively question his role as performer. Although he ostensibly performs as himself and appears to offer up moments of autobiographical testimony, Hoyle’s work is deeply ironical in a way that forces spectators to be suspicious of his claims, particularly in regard to notions of blanket identitarian ‘truths’ and, indeed, heuristic notions of community. In this way, it could be argued that the theatrical project undergirding ‘HIV ünt AIDS’ and other instalments of Hoyle’s Magazine is one that attempts to trouble the ‘romantic’ elements of community Joseph theorises, deconstructing from within the auditorium the perceived benefits of community-building, particularly in relation to solo subcultural performances designed to ‘speak back’ to the mainstream.

Stephen Greer conceptualises this solo performance project as that of the so-called ‘conscious pariah,’ a figure who challenges claims to collective injury and radicalism that are imbricated within the discourse of marginalised communities, whilst simultaneously denouncing elements of prevailing hegemonic ideology. Hoyle embodies this figure, Greer argues, thanks to his ‘acerbic critique of homogenised desire and homonormative consumerism within mainstream gay culture [that] is inflected by an awareness of the performer’s own complicity within those same discourses of desire, and the fragility of his own capacity to enact radical alternatives’ (82). This critique of homonormative consumerism is most clearly detectable in Hoyle’s frequent references to the £5.99 tickets audience members were required to
purchase in order to gain admission to his performance. At one point during the audience participation segment of the show, Hoyle asks someone he has invited to the stage to talk about their personal experiences regarding safe sex and HIV testing. He asks the participant why they decided to take a test, then quickly turns to the audience to quip ‘It’s a very psychological study that we’re going for for £5.99 tonight’ (‘David Hoyle – HIV ünt AIDS ULI’ 05:32-05:36). In this way, Hoyle expresses a degree of ambivalence about the politics of his work. On the one hand, he seems genuinely interested in nurturing an environment in which HIV testing can be talked about openly in a bid to reduce stigma and suffering, something explicitly asserted at the beginning of the show in the statement: ‘I think collectively we can find out procedures for living, for supporting one another, for being’ (‘David Hoyle – HIV ünt AIDS Pt 3’ 03:51-04:01). On the other hand, however, his show is haunted by its implication within neoliberal structures and, by extension, the ways in which capitalism shapes Hoyle’s relationship with audience members. Lurking beneath his witty references to the cost of RVT tickets are questions surrounding whether we should put a price on a person’s testimony and the ways in which doing so necessarily positions audience members as consumers. Hoyle expresses ambivalence towards these issues by modulating affective community discourse with regular ironic interjections, reminding the audience of the material conditions of his performance and the fact that his decision to perform necessitates that he forsake his widely-known political desires to ‘ban capitalism – the cruellest, most insulting system any so-called civilisation could choose to impose upon itself” (Hoyle qtd. in Milazzo).

Ultimately, Hoyle’s clear discomfort and ambivalence surrounding the theatrical institution within which he is mired seem to be irresolvable. Or, rather, he is unable to offer alternative structures. As Daniel Oliver puts it, Hoyle embraces a kind of fragile
didacticism that works as ‘an affirmation of the ambiguities, fragments and contradictions that arise through the impossibility of any project or cause to be totally stable and uncompromised’ (115). Nowhere is this better demonstrated than at the end of ‘HIV ünt AIDS’: following a bitter diatribe about the ways in which LGBT people celebrate superficial freedoms that capitalism has granted in order to involve them in consumerism, Hoyle promptly reassures the audience that ‘I’ll be back. I do believe in value for money’ (‘David Hoyle – HIV Ünt AIDS Pt 2’ 04:52-04:56). Whilst distinguishing himself as a cheap act is, of course, ironic and comically self-deprecating, Hoyle’s quick reassurance of repeat performances also indicates that he identifies political, social and pedagogical value within his work at the RVT. Whilst the collective politics ‘for living, for supporting one another, for being’ may be always fractured by neoliberal imperatives, his self-reflexive recognition of this fact represents a dramaturgy that moves towards communality; that makes the best of the institutional resources available and necessarily consents to certain hegemonic structures to help spark discussion surrounding HIV/AIDS.

In a break from other third-generation HIV/AIDS plays examined in this study so far, therefore, Hoyle’s performances deconstruct the ideological framework shaping subcultural institutions such as the RVT and, indeed, the ‘communities’ that form around them. Whilst the notion of a coherent and queer community that lies counter to mainstream society may be quixotic or misguided, he suggests, the venue provides fertile ground to isolate and discuss some of the most pressing issues faced by HIV-positive individuals within the venue and beyond. Hoyle is not the only third-generation playwright and performer who uses his solo platform to interrogate uncritical notions of ‘community’, however. As I will explore in the next section of this chapter, Irish solo performer Neil Watkins also questions the role of community
when approaching HIV/AIDS in a theatrical context, albeit in a very different way to Hoyle. Rather than attacking the institution of theatre in an explicit way, he plays with the testimonial form itself to alienate his audience, thereby problematising aforementioned scholarly notions that solo performance is, somehow, immanently communal and immune to hegemonic forces.

“I wank, therefore I slam”: Neil Watkins’ *The Year of Magical Wanking*

Neil Watkins’ play *The Year of Magical Wanking*, which was first performed at Ireland’s Queer Notions festival in 2010, can best be described as a (mostly) autobiographical poetic monologue exploring a year in his life as a 33-year-old, HIV-positive gay man living in Dublin. The play tracks the twelve months following Watkins’ diagnosis as he spends a considerable amount of time depressed and alone in his deceased grandfather’s flat, failing to connect with old friends or new lovers and struggling with drug addiction. That Watkins is the same age as Jesus when he died is no coincidence here, as he figures himself as a kind of prophetic martyr sent to warn others against making the same life-altering mistakes as his younger self, blaming such mistakes, in part, on feelings of personal shame instilled by his strict Catholic upbringing. The play is deeply intertextual, making references not only to Catholic tradition but to myriad religious, spiritual and cultural phenomena both mainstream and obscure. One example of such intertextuality is the work’s title, which is, of course, a play on Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), an autobiographical performance describing the author’s experiences of grief surrounding the death of her husband in 2003 and scrutinising her own capricious behaviour and emotional
instability in the year leading up to the event. Before the play even begins, therefore, this literary allusion prepares the audience for themes surrounding mourning and loss. The fact that Watkins replaces the word ‘thinking’ with the more ribald term ‘wanking’, however, also alerts us to its comical overtones and potential for bathos. On the one hand, then, *TYoMW* could be compared to Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* in that both plays exploit the monologue form to probe the pain of their respective personal histories and, by extension, reveal the ways in which they have been marginalised by hegemonic discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS. In so doing, both performers also liken themselves to Christ, using their suffering as a tool to disseminate some of the harms still exacted on queer-identified individuals and the HIV-positive. Unlike the quasi-utopic and apparently community-building prophetic figure that Miller embodies through intense audience interaction, however, Watkins’ oblique humour, arcane cultural references, and indirect mode of address distance him from spectators. As one reviewer of Watkins’ performance at the Adelaide Fringe put it,

> There was a disconnect between audience members and between the audience and Watkins, and the gaps between these spaces increased with every lonely, hesitant laugh.

*The Year of Magical Wanking* is a series of deeply personal tales, interesting stories performed with skill. What the barrier between me and the performance was I don’t know. (Howard)

The effects of this distance, I argue, unsettle aforementioned links between solo performance, testimony and an imagined queer community.

The prologue to *TYoMW* offers much insight into the political dimensions of Watkins’ mode of indirect audience address:
Great Spirit and Great Mystery hear my prayer.
Bless all the beings gathered in this room.
I bid your tastebuds welcome to my womb.
This is my truth. I bare my fruit. Let’s share […]
I am Neil Martin Watkins and I am
A sex and love addicted innocent.
There’s patterns I’ve adopted that would taint the
Love of Saints. I wank, therefore I slam. (293)

Although not stated explicitly, the ‘Great Spirit’ and ‘Great Mystery’ that Watkins describes here could well refer to the translated names of a deity known as Wakan Tanka within Native North American Sioux tradition, particularly considering his later references to two-spirited people, a designation used within indigenous communities to describe those who fulfil a traditional third gender role beyond those of man or woman. Wakan Tanka is thought to be the creator god by the Sioux: rather than embodying a personal god as in monotheistic religions, this supreme being represents an all-encompassing essence that is present within every being and object, thereby resembling aspects of pantheistic and animistic beliefs (Leeming). That Watkins invokes this esoteric spiritual presence at the very beginning of TYoMW immediately alerts us to his unorthodox approach to the relationship between performer and spectator. Rather than conceptualising the audience as a boundaried entity comprised of self-governing individuals intent on watching his show, Watkins entreaties an amorphous and all-encompassing spiritual essence to hear his stories. The non-specificity of this audience unsettles the intimate nature of the traditional testimonial form: by addressing anything and everything, Watkins refuses to acknowledge spectators as comprising their own small ‘community’ as Heddon, Román or Hughes might have it. By labelling the work a piece of slam poetry, Watkins even reformulates
the performer-spectator relationship. As Susan Somers-Willett explains in a study on the genealogy of slam competitions,

The poetry slam was founded on the tenets that the audience is not obligated to listen to the poet, that the poet should compel the audience to listen to him or her, that anyone may judge a competition, and that the competition should be open to all people and all forms of poetry. (5)

Slam poetry frees audience members from traditional spectatorial obligations, subverting the notion of the testimonial form as straightforwardly pedagogical. In subscribing to its tenets, therefore, Watkins signals that he is not interested in the solo form as a means to disseminate incontestable truths regarding the experiences of individuals marginalised by hegemonic powers. Rather, as demonstrated by his prefacing the show with a ‘prayer’, Watkins seeks guidance and knowledge about the complex conditions of his marginalisation throughout the performance, particularly when it comes to matters of bodily autonomy. From the play’s outset, therefore, it is clear that TYoMW does not represent a community-building queer political project in the tradition of, say, Hughes or Miller, who, instead of asking questions, use their platforms to denounce marginalising hegemonic forces whilst necessarily participating within neoliberal institutions. Watkins appears to be less willing even than Hoyle to accept the everyday neoliberalism of such institutions as a necessary evil. Rather, he tacitly questions the political efficacy of what has become a traditional form of queer testimonial theatre.

Albeit that Watkins resists reaching out to an imagined queer community via testimonial forms, he still has much to say about the notion of community more generally and its relationship to himself as a queer-identified and HIV-positive
individual (and, of course, to the forces of neoliberal hegemony). Whilst wary of diverging too far from my exploration of community within the context of neoliberal theatrical institutions, I believe that *TYoMW*’s exploration of the complex links between national and sexual shame and Ireland’s precarious post-2008 economy instantiate Joseph’s theories surrounding ‘romantic’ communities and can enlighten us as to why Watkins is so reluctant to treat the audience as its own communal entity. As Joseph explains in a chapter on the discourses of what she terms global/localisation,

> Even as capital (and information and people) flows ever more unfettered across the boundaries of nations, traveling great distances instantaneously, capitalism, we are told, attends ever more precisely to place and culture and depends ever more profoundly on the extra-economic bonds of community and kinship. (147)

Indeed, Joseph identifies an increased emphasis on the importance of ‘the local’ within the discourse of globalisation that can be synomised with the popularisation of neoliberal community discourse. Like ‘community’, she writes, ‘the local’ invokes ‘particularity of identity, social relationships, and values against the abstraction of capital’ (147). As with the term ‘community’, however, localisation discourse is in no way immune from hegemonic neoliberal influences. Much of Joseph’s chapter explores parallels between the notions of kinship, community, family and nationalism, and the ways in which they are variously deployed to bolster a distinctly neoliberal agenda and sell the fiction that, in a world of globalised markets, cultural group formations can exist while remaining untouched by the influences of capital. She explains:

> Part of the seductiveness of the global/localization story (by contrast with the globalization as totalizing story) is that it seems
such a precise answer to the yearning for community produced in the Romantic narrative. But it is too perfect an answer [...] once again constitute[s] community as autonomous from capitalism and modernity. (152)

By dealing explicitly and frequently with the fact of his own Irishness in *TYoMW*, therefore, Watkins is well-placed to explore the extent to which local narratives are affected by the workings of neoliberal hegemony.

Within the context of Watkins’ upbringing, the complicated links between an imagined Irish Catholic community and capitalistic structures are clearly tangible in his (sometimes contradictory) articulations of shame. Watkins’ monologue is peppered with questions, both rhetorical and implicit, about the shame he feels surrounding his experiences of sexual abuse as a young boy, his own sexual desires, and, of course, his HIV diagnosis. He asks, for example, in response to the tears shed while thinking of past abuses,

What’s with this flood?
It’s been locked up inside of me so long.
It isn’t right to interfere. It’s wrong.
I don’t know why I’m crying. For my blood. (310)

The dimensions of Watkins’ shame are shown here to be very complex. Whilst his tears at first appear to represent a response to memories of being abused as a child, he later attributes them to his HIV-positive blood, illustrating the ways in which the roots of trauma can be entangled and impervious to anatomisation. Indeed, both HIV and sexual abuse are invasive, capable of crossing borders both physical and imaginary and, as demonstrated by the euphemistic language used to describe trauma (abuse becomes ‘interference’ whilst his seropositivity becomes merely ‘blood’), the source of indignities he is unwilling to engage with or fully accept. That he claims not to know
why he is crying is evidence of disorientation or denialism designed either to fool himself or his audience into believing he is unscathed by the past, as well as acknowledgement of the multi-dimensional, interdependent origins of shame. Later in the play, however, despite the obvious difficulty of disentangling shameful feelings, Watkins opens up to the idea of confronting his pain directly. Initial feelings of denial are sharply contrasted by the first few lines of a section entitled ‘June’:

I don’t know many people who were not
Abused. That’s just being Irish. Forty shades
Of shame. We all submit when men invade.
Rape is the culture that we know. (316)

By attributing his childhood abuse to the simple fact of his Irishness, Watkins reformulates and metaphorises personal pain into a collective national trauma that, as evidenced by the turn to more forthright terminology surrounding rape and invasion, he is less keen to cover up. This metaphor is consonant in some ways with what Josep M. Armengol identifies as an established political tradition within Irish poetry to personify Ireland as a defenceless woman vulnerable to rape and violation by an English invader, most notably in the aisling genre developed around the 17th and 18th centuries (8). Feminising Irishness in this way reflects at once what was seen as Ireland’s shamefully subordinate position in Anglo-Irish colonial history and, as Armengol explains, the strength of a kind of nationalism which ‘transformed Irish women into “living” representations of the myth of the Motherland,’ sullied victims of a rapacious England intent on ruining Irish culture (11). More recently in Ireland’s poetical canon, this notion was famously addressed and deconstructed in Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘Act of Union’ (1975) which refers, of course, to the 1801 Act of Union that served to merge Ireland and Great Britain into a unified state for over a
century. In it, Ireland is figured as a once-ravished, now long-suffering mother whose ‘stretchmarked body’ must endure ‘big pain/That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again’ (Heaney 24-28). Watkins’ conflation of his shame and vulnerability with Irishness, therefore, suggests that the shame he (and, indeed, others) have endured at the hands of individual men cannot be disentangled from the (gendered) collective shame brought about by a long history of perceived failures by the nation state. Indeed, whilst Watkins refers most obviously here to the multitude of historical sexual abuse scandals to have come out of Ireland and its Catholic Church in recent years, the feeling of shame that runs throughout TYoMW can thus also be traced back to political and cultural forces that extend far beyond the country’s religious institutions alone.9

For instance, beyond the intimate details of Watkins’ life, this question of shame and bodily autonomy might be read as synecdochal of the wider economic autonomy of Ireland following the collapse of the so-called Celtic Tiger and the articulations of national shame that accompanied this. The Celtic Tiger era can broadly be described as the period between the mid-1990s and the late-2000s in which the Republic of Ireland experienced unprecedented economic growth before falling deeply into recession around the time of the global financial crisis of 2008. As Marcus Free and Clare Scully note in an essay on shame and confession within the context of post-Celtic Tiger Irish media, a distinctly neoliberal discourse of somatic self-discipline and control arose in response to the economic crisis that somehow spoke to ‘a learned predisposition towards habitual and corporal modesty and self-regulation peculiar to Irish Catholicism’ (309). Indeed, as the country struggled under the weight of national

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9 Findings from inquiries into historical abuse within Ireland have been widely covered by the news media in recent decades. Reports such as the Murphy Report (2009), Ryan Report (2009), and the McAleese Report (2013) have all provided detailed information on systemic violence and sexual abuse within both the country’s domestic sphere and its religious and state institutions.
debt, its government rolled out austerity measures that placed responsibility for the economic downturn on individuals, a strategy that Colin Coulter characterises as a means to protect the interests of a wealthy few. He notes that:

In official discourse, the origins of the crash are often located in a certain presumed pathology among the Irish people. Retrospective accounts of the Celtic Tiger period are often replete with the language of lunacy, a propensity that would find its clearest and most controversial expression in Taoiseach Enda Kenny’s pronouncement at the annual Davos gathering of global wealth that what had gone wrong in Ireland was that ‘people simply went mad with borrowing.’ (10-11)

The reality, of course, is far more complex. On top of an increase in spending and borrowing across Ireland, the boom years can be traced back to a variety of interlinked governmental factors such as corporation tax cuts, relatively recent access to trade within the European Union, and a raft of new industrial policies. Pathologising the Irish citizenry, therefore, was a politically expedient way to protect and support the neoliberal status quo by placing the burden of guilt on individuals, forcing them to ‘atone’ for previous consumer choices through an austerity programme that saw deep cuts to public services. In this way, Free and Scully argue, ‘the articulation of a post-boom shame was indicative of how neoliberalism became intertwined with an equally specific and deeply ingrained Irish Catholic culture of self-denial as morally uplifting and a means of atoning for guilt’ (309). The disorientation and shame expressed in the previous passage, therefore, represent Watkins’ personal inability to conform to such ascetic dictates, an apparent failing that he frequently connects to both his seropositivity and sex and drug addictions. As well as committing a variety of sins that flout the expectations of his Irish Catholic community, therefore, Watkins fails to
adhere to a distinctly neoliberal ethics of self-care and personal responsibility, something already explored in previous chapters of this study.

This link between religious and neoliberal asceticism is exemplified well in the ‘December’ section of the play, in which the consequences of Watkins’ lack of self-discipline under the neoliberal hegemony are made clear:

It is a council flat where I reside.
Since I confessed to having HIV
My family all agree it should be me
Who holds the fort for Grandad who’s just died.

Somehow the Council buy he’s still alive.
No legal right have I to warm his bed.
But I sure need a place to rest my head.
I couldn’t just inherit it. I lie […]

The Council after two years have copped this
And wish for me to leave. It’s time to go.
I’m shocked. This is so sudden. I don’t know
Where I’ll end up. I fear the street’s abyss. (298)

His family’s decision to place Watkins in a risky housing situation as a consequence of his seropositivity is clearly a form of punishment for a perceived inability to responsibly maintain control over his health and finances. Rather than support him within their homes and thereby take on the burden of ‘shame’ related to his HIV diagnosis and need for welfare provisions, Watkins’ family pushes him into a council-owned flat which he is not entitled to inhabit, effectively leaving him at the mercy of an increasingly frugal state. Reading this passage alongside Joseph’s work gives us an insight into how Watkins’ deconstructs the so-called ‘fetishization of family”—our ability to forget that our attachments to our families are economic’ as well as its wider
links to the ‘romantic’ conceptualisation of community and kinship constructed by neoliberal hegemony (Joseph 165). As Joseph explains, citing work from ethnographer Sylvia Yanagisako, kinship relations serve to arrange and concretise economic hierarchies even in economically prosperous states. As Yanagisako’s study of Italian family firms showed, the ideologies of kinship that structured the management and ownership of the firms represent complex processes that serve to both punish and protect members of a given network depending on how well they fulfil their roles as generators of capital or participants in social reproduction (Joseph 159). As a productive entity under capitalism, then, Watkins’ family is bound to some extent by the productivity and ability of its members to fashion a disciplined and ‘sellable’ self in line with the tenets of everyday neoliberalism. Read in the context of post-2008 economic precarity in Ireland, Watkins’ plight is also symbolic of wider issues surrounding a similarly circumscribed ‘local community’ under post-Celtic Tiger Irish governance. Indeed, the description of Dublin’s streets as an ‘abyss’ – somewhere devoid of human care or interaction – symbolises the decimation of the welfare state under austerity and the privatisation of care into the hands of families and similar kinship structures. In this way, Cormac O’Brien notes, Watkins performs the fears of an increasingly disenfranchised working- and middle-class made precarious by an ever-escalating programme of economic austerity. Coupled with this is his search for some meaning and pride in an Irishness that is no longer completely its own master, an Irishness now tainted with the shame of non-sovereignty, and that particularly stigma-inducing troika of the EU, the IMF, and ECB. Watkins’s performance is thus imbued with and informed by the powerlessness of the quotidian Irish experience that operates outside of, and is yet
moulded and shaped by, political and economic forces beyond its control. (82)

In this way, Watkins draws parallels between his feelings of personal shame and exclusion from the family unit, and a more generalised ‘Irish shame’ and exclusion from the local community. As Coulter notes, Ireland’s economic crisis in 2008 generated a discourse of communality and collectivity that centred on sacrifice and financial expiation (15). Access to this community, however, was dependent on an individual’s ability to remain financially independent and not reliant on state welfare provisions. Consistent with the framework of everyday neoliberalism, therefore, Watkins’ seropositivity, financial troubles, and sex and drug addictions (all of which signal an inability to atone for various kinds of ‘shame’ through self-regulation and asceticism) exclude him from a multiplicity of kinship groups and communities.

Indeed, the parallels between these romantic conceptualisations of Irishness and the caring family unit also extend to the notion of queer kinship and community. Rather than conceptualising HIV positivity as something around which queer communal ties can be nurtured (as Hoyle suggests in ‘HIV ünt AIDS’), Watkins’ serostatus consistently appears as a barrier to making affective connections with others. This is best articulated during moments when Watkins describes attempts to hook up with other gay men in Dublin:

I used to be good looking. But who cares.
I’ll die soon with some luck. Won’t have to face
Up to the years I’ve put on weight. My waist
Is fine. It keeps the predators in their

Apartments. Out of mine. Can’t give them AIDS.
I call it AIDS sometimes. I know I’m fine.
I shouldn’t have told anyone. To thine
Own self be false and to them all. Display

A milky mask of cow manure and moo.
Why can’t I just get on with life? There’s queers
Are riddled years and they seem grand. It’s fear
That keeps me locked inside my rut. I know.

I watch the real boys pick each other up.
I am the last of the great gay ashamed. (316-7)

By describing potential sexual partners as ‘predators’, Watkins laments what he sees as the anti-communitarian culture propagated by other gay men in the city. In a similar way to Lachlan Philpott’s *Bison* or Patrick Cash’s *HIV Monologues* (analysed in Chapter Three), Watkins conceptualises this culture as dependent on the logic of commerce. As an overweight man whose good looks have apparently faded, Watkins views his lack of success with other men as a product of his ‘unsellable’ body and inability to adhere to the self-regulatory principles that could increase the ‘value’ of his person. Clearly connected to the unmarketability of his appearance is Watkins’ shame surrounding his HIV diagnosis. By erroneously describing himself as having AIDS – a condition that develops when the HIV virus is not treated and controlled with antiretroviral drugs – Watkins gestures towards feelings of lost somatic autonomy or self-control. Within this framework, his virus is an undesirable attribute that could endanger the so-called ‘real boys’ of the sexual marketplace (the ‘market players’, perhaps) and is connected to an apparent inability to practise self-discipline and adhere to the neoliberal tenets of self-betterment and growth. Again, therefore, Watkins’ feelings about his HIV status represent one element within a complex nexus of shame involving his Irishness, his place within a neoliberal family-oriented society, and his connections to other gay men in the city. Like Joseph, therefore, Watkins is suspicious
of the overlapping notions of kinship, family, community, and ‘the local’, albeit in less explicit terms. As a consequence of his resistance (or, perhaps, failure) to submit to an atomistic neoliberal politics, his past experiences are replete with instances of exclusion from every one of these group entities.

Having established Watkins’ misgivings surrounding the notions of (queer) community, kinship, family, and ‘the local’ – all of which he implicitly suggests are polluted by the touch of neoliberal ideology – I will return to the ways in which the performer uses the solo form to interrogate such notions. Again, Greer’s *Queer Exceptions* offers a helpful framework through which to examine such a complex solo performance as *TYoMW*. Whilst Greer frames Hoyle as a ‘pariah’, he conceptualises Watkins as a ‘martyr’ figure. The martyr solo performer, Greer claims, represents a heuristic for examining the conditions in which politicised subjectivities are allowed – or called upon – to stand as surrogates for others or to speak for themselves. While resilience may be prized within neoliberalism as a feature of self-regulating, responsible citizenship, [the martyr presents] the possibilities of endurance as a mode of resistance and self-definition which operates through ‘the vulnerability and incapacities of the body rather than its prowess.’ (52)

Although Watkins *appears* vulnerable, then, describing a series of ways in which he has been let down, harmed, or even attacked throughout *TYoMW* – and whilst he may not boast a body that is traditionally powerful or desirable – his presence as the central and only figure on stage represents a kind of strength and autonomy that allows him to survive without depending on financial or social structures of neoliberal hegemony. As Greer puts it, this kind of exceptionalism, whilst necessarily perpetuating some of the hegemonic configurations of power, also manifests and makes clear
‘neoliberalism’s incompleteness and inconsistency in a manner that manifests the possibility of resistance, critique and change’ (51). As already discussed, the inconsistencies that TYoMW exposes can be found in neoliberal configurations of collective groups such as communities, nations or kinship structures, and the solo form facilitates the exposition of inconsistencies by extricating the ‘martyr’ from complicity within the individualist and corporatist structures of such groups. This extrication is achieved, Greer argues, through the adoption of ‘a mode of truth-telling which extends beyond the singularly exceptional body or circumstances of the performer to become available as the site of communal identification and feeling’ (77). As Cormac O’Brien puts it, ‘Watkins’s performance is an act of transference, shifting shame back onto the socio-political and cultural structures in Irish life that stigmatise the HIV-positive body in an effort to control it’ (81). Rather than simply expressing his shame as the product of a series of circumstances exclusive to him and others within an imagined ‘community’ of other HIV-positive people, then, Watkins identifies the ideological structures that conspire to marginalise and subjugate a multiplicity of identity groups. Instead of using his shame as a means to turn his audience into a ‘community’ through empathetic identification of similar kinds of personal shame, Watkins reconceptualises shame as something immanent to neoliberal articulations of community, nation or kinship that categorise people in order to control them.

In this way, Watkins uses solo performance to upend traditional modes of testimonial theatre and to deconstruct ‘romantic’ articulations of community, while still opening up a space for audiences to consider areas of communal identification. Rather than building a community with distinct boundaries by acting as a ‘surrogate’ for the experiences of a particular identity group, these communal identifications (seropositivity, for example, or Irishness and its ‘40 shades of shame’) are a means to
uncover long-standing mechanisms of oppression naturalised by neoliberal hegemony. By denaturalising such mechanisms through a narrative of exceptional endurance, Watkins calls out to anyone and everyone (the ‘Great Spirit’ referred to earlier) to look critically at the ways in which neoliberal forces have conspired to push him out of structures of care into economic precarity, and to recognise the ways in which the same thing could potentially happen to others. Whilst, like Hoyle, he does not offer any specific solutions to this issue, particularly in relation to HIV stigmatisation, his refusal to adopt the traditional calls for community that tend to accompany testimonial solo performance lays the foundation for a politics resembling something that Jeremy Gilbert terms a ‘politics of the common’ as opposed to a neoliberal politics of community. By reconfiguring the necessarily exclusionary language of community as a language accessible to all members of society – the commons – Gilbert argues that the mechanisms of marginalisation exemplified by Watkins (and conceptualised as a political impasse by Hoyle) can begin to be tackled. As he explains,

What is particularly useful about the idea of the commons as distinct from the idea of community is that it does not depend upon any presumption that the participants in a commons will be bound together by a shared identity or a homogeneous culture. Rather, they will be related primarily by their shared interest in defending or producing a set of common resources, and this shared interest is likely to be the basis for an egalitarian and potentially democratic set of social relationships. (Common Ground 165)

Watkins’ open audience address at the beginning of TYoMW is an example of commons-based discourse. It elides the individualism which may inhere in community formations and, by extension, fights their hierarchical tendencies and exclusionary mechanisms. Rather than positioning himself as a pedagogical figure in the tradition
of testimonial solo performance, therefore, Watkins simply opens up opportunities for spectators to identify areas of common experience that shine a light on the harm neoliberalism exacts on a wide range of subjects, potentially energising a politics that is not merely contained within a specific (queer) community. That Watkins makes no explicit calls to action, however, reflects an inability or unwillingness to envision concrete counterhegemonic strategies beyond the auditorium. Like Hoyle, there is a sense of political paralysis in *TYoMW* in its inability to reconcile Watkins’ counterhegemonic politics with his involvement in the neoliberal theatre institution. Despite the lack of a coherent way forward, however, it is abundantly clear that Watkins’ solo performance lays the groundwork for a queer politics cognisant of the ways in which oppression and stigma experienced by the HIV-positive are tied in with the marginalisation of a range of other identity groups that fail to assimilate within a neoliberal heteronorm.

**The changing face of solo performance**

To conclude this chapter, I would like to make explicit the ways in which third-generation HIV/AIDS solo performances and, more specifically, testimonial forms of the genre, operate under necessarily different hegemonic terms to those of the second-generation. Indeed, the neoliberal project has exerted a markedly tighter hegemonic grip across much of the world over recent decades. To reinvoke the work of Stuart Hall, it is important to recognise that the hegemonic order is something protean and processual:
hegemony is a tricky concept and provokes muddled thinking. No project achieves “hegemony” as a completed project. It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are permanent or final. Hegemony has constantly to be “worked on”, maintained, renewed, revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions [...] and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew. (‘The Neoliberal Revolution’ 26)

Neoliberalism, therefore, was not always extant at the level of the ‘everyday’. Rather, hegemonic processes have conspired to make the central tenets of neoliberalism into ‘common sense’. As tracked in Jen Harvie’s *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013), the realm of the theatre in particular has undergone an acceleratory transition towards an ‘entrepreneurial’ culture characterised by cuts to state arts funding, corporate philanthropy, and crowdfunding. Artists and dramaturgs working in the twenty-first century, then, have quickly become so-called ‘artrepreneurs’, implicitly required ‘to model entrepreneurialism and to prioritize its values’ in ways that would have been less familiar to those working before the turn of the millennium (Harvie 63). In this way, the institutions that provided second-generation solo performers such as Tim Miller with a platform in the late 1980s and early 1990s, whilst still in thrall to capitalist structures, had not yet experienced the full extent of ‘artrepreneurialism’ that courses through today’s theatrical landscape. This difference is important to note as it is reflected in Miller’s and Watkins’ respective relationships with the notion of community.

Indeed, my assertions in Chapter Two that Miller’s *My Queer Body* lays down hopeful foundations for an affective community-oriented politics should be contextualised in accordance with the work’s production date. Although the way in
which neoliberalism has been historicised varies widely – many scholars assert that neoliberalism started in earnest at the advent of Thatcherism and Reaganomics (Manfred and Steger), whilst others trace the seeds of neoliberal ideology back to a free market theory developed in 1950s Germany known as Ordoliberalism (Slobodian) – the trajectory of neoliberal hegemony is clear: the atomisation and individualism that is naturalised under everyday neoliberalism grows ever more pervasive as the years wear on. It is in this way that the words ‘queer community’ would have meant something different to both Miller and Watkins when their respective plays were premièred. The tools to create a queer theatrical community based on (exclusionary) patronage and crowd-funding like that of the RVT, for example, would not have been so widely available, and the notion of a queer community as a demographic market to which services and cultural products could be pitched would not have been so all-pervasive. Put simply, the project of homonormativity – an offshoot of neoliberalism – was still in its relatively incipient stages: same-sex marriage rights (often cited as exemplary of homonormative values) had not yet swept the many countries in which it is permitted today and the ongoing AIDS crisis had suspended the assimilation of gay people into heteronormative/homonormative kinship structures thanks to ongoing stigmatisation and neoconservative efforts to demonise homosexuality through narratives of contagion. Whilst this demonisation still exists amongst certain religious and political groups in the US, for example, the rise of homonormativity has led to widespread assimilation of gay people that accede to the familial norm. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, however, a new generation of queer artists such as Watkins have found that ties between solo performance and community are simultaneously bound to neoliberal and homonormative apparatuses. It is such a generational divide that leads on to the next chapter of this study. In it, I will examine
how third-generational HIV/AIDS plays account for differences between older and younger generations of queer-identified people and whether the strengthening of neoliberal hegemony has impacted conceptualisations of such differences.
Chapter 5: Third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre and the question of queer heritage

As the third generation of HIV/AIDS theatre has matured over the 2010s, so its playwrights and dramaturgs have increasingly felt the need to address the notion of so-called ‘queer heritage’. A raft of recent HIV/AIDS plays has questioned whether the gay or queer-identified can (or indeed should) lay claim to a narratively coherent and collective history. As well as examining the ways in which HIV/AIDS has potentially ruptured such a history, many of these works examine notions surrounding kinship and quasi-familial bonding between younger and older generations of what, as shown in the previous chapter, is often reductively or uncritically referred to as the queer community. The most notable and critically lauded of such generational plays is Matthew Lopez’s *The Inheritance*, which premièred at London’s Young Vic Theatre in 2018, directed by Stephen Daldry. It creatively reimagines E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910) as a means to explore the intergenerational dynamics existing amongst a large group of gay men living in New York in 2016, as well as to question how their lives have been shaped by homosexual men of the past, Forster included. In fact, Forster appears as Morgan, an almost spectral incarnation of the writer who helps the gay couple at the centre of the play, Eric and Toby, as well as their contemporaries, narrativise accounts of their young lives. Perhaps inevitably, *The Inheritance* focuses heavily on the ways in which the AIDS-related deaths of many gay men in the 1980s and 1990s have affected gay and queer-identified youths in the twenty-first century, particularly in regard to their sense of identity and understanding of queer history, activism and HIV-positivity in the present. This is done primarily through Walter, an older character who describes his experiences of the early decades of the epidemic in
detail to Eric, encouraging the younger man to imagine how such a crisis would affect his life were it to happen today and to address a supposed generational amnesia surrounding AIDS. Tied in with this, however, are broader-reaching questions about how an increasingly capitalistic political economy has affected the possibility of a queer heritage. Unlike many of the third-generation plays already discussed in this study, *The Inheritance* features explicit and extensive discussion between its characters about contemporary political issues, touching on topics including Donald Trump’s election, spiralling levels of poverty and financial inequality within the US, and the ways in which these topics intersect with queer politics.

In Daldry’s production, many of these conversations take place around a large raised platform, generating scenes reminiscent of an academic roundtable discussion. During these scenes, the young men relay their thoughts about the evils of the Republican Party and the culture of self-interest that they detect within its heart, alluding sometimes to the rise of President Donald Trump and his legislative actions. Nowhere is this more starkly demonstrated than during a heated discussion between Henry Wilcox, one of the play’s older gay men who is both a millionaire businessman and a donor to the Republican Party, and a group of younger gay men with Democratic leanings. After accusing Henry of forgiving the Reagan administration’s years of inaction during the early years of the AIDS crisis, Jasper, one of his younger peers exclaims: ‘Your party is presently attempting to ram through Congress a bill that would strip twenty-three million people of their health insurance just so that you can have another tax cut that you don’t need’ (Lopez, *The Inheritance* 169). Here, he clearly denounces Trump’s aims to dismantle the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, a federal statute designed to minimise the number of Americans not covered by medical insurance as a result of the country’s largely privatised healthcare system.
This kind of anti-free-market discourse runs throughout many of the conversations that take place around the table, something that has not gone unnoticed by *The Inheritance*’s many reviewers. Neil Dowden, for example, notes the play’s interest in exploring ‘collective responsibility versus individual freedom, and idealistic bohemianism versus materialistic capitalism’ (Dowden). Writing for *Variety*, meanwhile, Matt Trueman states that ‘[l]ike *Angels in America, The Inheritance* […] is a vast, imperfect and unwieldy masterpiece that unpicks queer politics and neoliberal economics anew’, even going on to decree that the play ‘is, above all, a damning indictment of individualism; the play’s every relationship effectively an economic arrangement, prostitutes and kept husbands alike’ (Trueman). Such analysis of the play, however, overlooks the ways in which its characters are subject to ‘common sense’ notions inculcated by everyday neoliberalism. The anti-neoliberal critiques offered up by the young men, whilst often perceptive, focus rather crudely on economic legislation alone, leaving space for their anti-capitalist fervour to be compromised by the kinds of self-serving impulses characteristic of neoliberalism’s hegemonic project. As noted by Doreen Massey in conversation with Stuart Hall regarding Gramscian notions of hegemony, burgeoning political crises (like the Trumpian healthcare plans condemned by Jasper) should be thought of as complex moments, where different parts of the overall social formation may themselves, independently, be in crisis in various ways, but at a certain point they are condensed. Although we see this moment as a big economic crisis, it is also a philosophical and political crisis in some ways – or it could be, if we got hold of the narrative. So it’s really important that we don’t only ‘do the economy’, as it were. (qtd. in Hall and Massey 59)
Although Massey is referring to the rise of neoliberalism in a British context here, her emphasis on looking beyond the realms of the economic to understand major political and social changes is vital for any study of the function of hegemony. Whilst Jasper may relay economic arguments that go against the hegemonic grain, the way in which he and his contemporaries discuss the notion of heritage is often markedly homonormative. Even as the unions of convenience discussed by Trueman may indeed be read as indictments of the exploitative or self-serving impulses generated by everyday neoliberalism, most are broken up by the end of the play, replaced by conventionally ‘healthy’ monogamous relationships that emulate those seen in first-generation HIV/AIDS plays such as *The Normal Heart* or *Holding the Man*, discussed in Chapter One. Characterised as the means by which to build a ‘cherished family home’, live a life ‘filled with love’ and, for one character, as an apparent ‘salvation’ from sex work (Lopez, *The Inheritance* 294), such unions make coherent a call for queer generationalism that mirrors familial bonds traditionally associated with the heteronorm and supported by neoliberal hegemony.

In this chapter, then, I will examine how far two intergenerational projects within the genre of HIV/AIDS theatre are able to reckon with the ways in which both HIV/AIDS and late capitalism have shaped ideas surrounding queer heritage. After looking more extensively at *The Inheritance*, I will turn to a lesser-known play, *The Gay Heritage Project*, which was first performed at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre – an avowedly queer institution – in 2013. It is worth noting at this stage that whilst both of these works boast long and complex playtexts that address a variety of issues surrounding HIV, heritage and queer culture in the twenty-first century (*The Inheritance* is particularly multi-faceted and complex in part due to its unwieldy length and substantial intertextuality) I will chiefly focus on aspects of the plays that
specifically address notions of generationalism and its ties to the political economy of third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre. In line with my cultural materialist approach, this means I will spend much of the chapter attending to peripheral textual and material aspects of the plays. I am conscious, then, that there is scope for much further examination of the playtexts in relation to some of the issues I have already explored throughout this thesis, particularly considering the fact that Lopez’s play premièred relatively recently and, therefore, that scholarly work addressing it is as yet scant. By homing in precisely on material aspects of the plays, however, I am able to demonstrate that whilst both ostensibly involve the expository critique of a neoliberal climate that has historically oppressed the HIV-positive and impacted the ways in which queer people of different generations relate to one another, they are also vulnerable to the seductions of everyday neoliberalism in both their content and material aspects, something that complicates claims towards an anti-neoliberal politics. Whilst the plays are very different in their performance venues and modes of address (TGHP is very much anchored in queer and subcultural traditions whilst The Inheritance has enjoyed significant mainstream success), both in the end put forward a notion of queer heritage as grounded in conventionally delimited units of kinship.

**The Inheritance: Queer heritage and ‘progressive neoliberalism’**

Following its première at London’s Young Vic in 2018, The Inheritance moved across the city to the Noël Coward Theatre later that year and eventually graced the stage of the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on New York’s Broadway in late-2019, marking the apotheosis of the play’s mainstream success. Given the length and premise of the play,
which comprises two parts totalling over seven hours of stage time and claims to
investigate how modern gay men in particular have overlooked an imagined heritage,
such success may appear a little puzzling. It may become clearer, however, when one
realises how much of the play’s political discourse embraces a kind of status quo
neoliberal politics, centring intently on the ways in which Donald Trump’s reactionary
Republican Party is crushing the rights of LGBTQ+ constituencies, rather than
exploring the genealogy of subcultural or countercultural queer identities. If one were
to identify any kind of direct political project behind The Inheritance, it would be
primarily to document the widespread resistance to the recrudescence of regressive
and fascistic attitudes within the US in the 2010s and beyond, in turn preserving the
trajectory of a kind of liberal homonormative gay politics which has thus far secured
assimilatory rights such as gay marriage. In everyday neoliberal terms, therefore, it
asks what the individual responsibility of young gay men is in the context of the
contemporary social and political crises in the country, particularly when it comes to
protecting and preserving the rights their queer forebears helped to secure.

The lens through which The Inheritance examines queer rights in a contemporary
context is primarily party political, with director Stephen Daldry pushing for the 2016
US election result to be included in the play. As explained by a writer for The New
Yorker,

addressing contemporary politics offered opportunities for
exploring how the activism of the past might inform the present.
“People had come to accept the idea that rights were rights,”
[Stephen] Daldry told me. “And what we understand now is that
they can be taken away from you really easily. ‘Act up, fight back’
is not a slogan from the eighties and nineties—it’s an active slogan
that we need now.” (Mead)
Here, Daldry imagines a coherent genealogy that starts with the counterhegemonic actions of ACT UP and leads directly to the fight against Trump taking place within the framework of US establishment politics, thus glossing over some of the problematic ways in which the concept of gay heritage has been produced by neoliberal hegemony. As we will see, by portraying queer history as already-coherent and counterhegemonic, political discussion in *The Inheritance* ignores the ways in which everyday neoliberalism has affected the development of queer politics, relaying instead a rather crude critique of neoliberal economic policies that reductively separates the Republican Party into the party of corporate individualism and the Democratic Party as proponents of equality.

During one of the play’s many roundtable discussions, for example, a character known as Jason 1 talks about the inequalities queer people face in contemporary America, imploring his peers to talk about suicide, violence, homelessness. These are the things that will require just as much of our attention as marriage equality did and these are the things we have the chance to make some real progress on once [Hillary] Clinton is elected. (Lopez, *The Inheritance* 85)

Here, Jason displays a nascent awareness of the ways in which injustices largely considered to be class-based such as homelessness are inextricably entwined with the oppression of queer constituencies, something that lends itself well to a kind of materialist anti-neoliberal politics. However, his uncritical confidence in the Democratic presidential candidate, something reiterated over and over again by many of the play’s young gay men, demonstrates problematic faith in a two-party system ill-equipped to remedy the injustices perpetrated by decades of neoliberal politics in the
US. Indeed, such faith reveals a blindness to the ways in which Hillary Clinton’s campaign and those of past Democratic administrations have capitulated to the demands of neoliberal hegemony. The reference to marriage equality as a touchstone of success that can be compared in its gravity to issues surrounding violence faced by the queer-identified, for example, immediately evinces an alignment with homonormative forms of politics. What goes unsaid, meanwhile, is the Democratic Party’s track record of propping up and strengthening neoliberal policy agendas that serve the interests of free marketeers, a strategy that Nancy Fraser terms ‘progressive neoliberalism’. Tracing the phenomenon back to the presidency of Bill Clinton in the early 1990s, Fraser defines it as

an alliance of mainstream current of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism and LGBTQ rights) on the one side, and high-end “symbolic” and service-based sectors of business (Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood) on the other. In this alliance, progressive forces are effectively joined with the forces of cognitive capitalism, especially financialization. (‘A Hobson’s Choice’ 41)

Like Miranda Joseph, Fraser takes issue with the use of the word ‘diversity’ within the corporate world, claiming that progressive neoliberals use it to push an agenda of supposed ‘meritocracy’ as a means to avoid discussions surrounding the structural inequalities deeply embedded within the contemporary landscape of capitalism. Within the established corporate hierarchy, she argues, ‘diversity’ speak is a cunning way for neoliberal ideologues to conflate the emancipation of minority groups with

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10 Turn to pp.67-9 of Chapter One for a deeper exploration of gay marriage and its ties to neoliberalism and homonormativity.
their increased abilities to get involved with a ruthless and subjugating neoliberal economy.

Due to everyday neoliberalism’s apotheosising of monetary growth into a ‘common sense’ aim that trumps almost all other political decisions, progressive neoliberalism dominated politics in the US and beyond from the early 1990s up until the beginning of the Trump era. The kind of progressive neoliberalism espoused by the Democratic Party since Bill Clinton was in office was able to gloss over the ways in which it bears a ‘heavy share of responsibility for the weakening of unions, the decline of real wages, the increasing precarity of work, and the rise of the “two-earner family” in place of the defunct family wage’ (Fraser, ‘A Hobson’s Choice’ 42). Indeed, it was Bill Clinton’s so-called “Third Way” – also adopted by a number of nominally leftist political parties across the globe such as Tony Blair’s New Labour in the UK – that caused this widespread immiseration by attempting to marry traditional welfare statism with the kind of neoliberalism developed during the Reagan and Thatcher years. It was perhaps best typified by Bill Clinton’s Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which, as he explained in an announcement on the legislation, sought to give people ‘a chance to draw a paycheck, not a welfare check’ through a series of cuts to welfare provisions (qtd. in The New York Times, ‘Welfare Legislation’). The bill was shot through with a markedly neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility, with the President explaining that it ‘must not let anyone off the hook […] We have to make sure that in the coming years, reform and change actually result in moving people from welfare to work. The business community must provide greater private-sector jobs’ (qtd. in The New York Times, ‘Welfare Legislation’). What separated the reform from neoliberal governance of the Reagan era was the way in which announcements of cuts were supported by a socially liberal
discourse imploring people to view the changes ‘not as a change to demonize or demean anyone […] to give them a chance to share in the prosperity […] that most of our people are enjoying today’ (qtd. in *The New York Times*, ‘Welfare Legislation’).

This type of discourse can be read as a direct rejection of the Reagan administration’s explicitly demonising, often racist and prejudicial, rhetoric surrounding people in receipt of help from the state. For example, Reagan’s speeches about welfare provisions were peppered with references to the so-called ‘welfare queen’, a euphemism for a woman typically characterised as young, black and with children born outside of marriage, who was in receipt of welfare benefits and food stamps that the President claimed allowed her to live in undeserved luxury. Even before Reagan took office he repeatedly used the case of Linda Taylor, a woman charged with welfare fraud who fitted the aforementioned profile, as a fear-mongering tool to demonise the poor, the non-white or, indeed, anyone who did not fit into a Christian nuclear family structure. As reported by *The New York Times* in 1976, ‘[t]he “welfare queen” item in Mr. Reagan’s repertoire is one of several that seem to be at odds with the facts,’ noting that he hugely inflated the scale of Linda Taylor’s crimes to stir up reactionary hostility towards welfare claimants (*The New York Times*, ‘Welfare Queen’). Reagan claimed that Taylor operated under 80 aliases and siphoned $150,000 from the state, whilst she was actually charged with operating under only four aliases and fraudulently acquiring around $8,000. Reagan’s welfare cuts, therefore, were, as Fraser notes, clearly ‘ethnonational, anti-immigrant, and pro-Christian, if not overtly racist, patriarchal, and homophobic’ in motive, and constitute what she calls ‘reactionary neoliberalism’ (‘From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump’). Measured against this type of politics, progressive neoliberalism looked truly
liberatory and was given an opening to inculcate new forms of ‘common sense’ within much of the nominal left in the US and beyond. As Fraser explains,

not all feminists, anti-racists, multiculturalists, and so forth were won over to the progressive neoliberal cause. But those who were, whether knowingly or otherwise, constituted the largest, most visible segment of their respective movements, while those who resisted it were confined to the margins. (‘From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump’)

The retention of staunchly neoliberal legislation by the Democratic Party after the Reagan years, then, served to crystallise everyday neoliberal ideas in the mind of the body politic.

So, it is this form of progressive neoliberalism that I detect within the political parlance of the young men in Lopez’s play. Of course, to read the young men’s unshakeable support of Hillary Clinton as airtight evidence of an underlying political project or message would be rather facile. The men’s verbal sparring matches with Henry at times expose logical flaws on both sides of their arguments and even serve to encourage feelings of sympathy towards the older man. When discussing how Henry made his millions, for example, Jasper states: ‘For a man like you, being gay is just a speed bump on your journey. You’ve arrived at your station in life without ever once understanding suffering or the meaning of adversity’ (Lopez, The Inheritance 171). This touches a nerve in Henry, prompting an uncharacteristically emotional outburst about the pain and fear he experienced during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and ‘90s. Jasper, meanwhile, is made to seem closed-minded, even unduly cruel in his presumptuous verbal attacks. In some ways, then, the play can be seen as revealing of the deficiencies of the dual-party system of allegiances that has structured the US
political landscape for decades in that it encourages the men on both sides to generate presumptions about each other that prove to be false or reductive, serving to dent their capacities for reasoned discussion. The liberal Forsterian basis on which the play is built, however, does not locate such problems within the reactionary-progressive neoliberal dichotomy that Fraser identifies. Rather, it couches the problem in idealist terms that align somewhat with progressive neoliberal values in their unwillingness to challenge hegemonic structures, asserted most concisely by Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End* in the famous phrase ‘only connect’. When Margaret wants to challenge the conservative and unmerciful views of Henry Wilcox (on whom Lopez’s Henry is, of course, based), she decides to

> only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. (Forster 195)

Such passion, for Margaret, in a kind of liberal humanist sense, is to be found in the beauty of art and cultural wares and, more broadly, in the spirit of social connection. She believes that to reconcile his conservative economic rationalisms, Henry must realise the passionate love that lies latent within him and, supposedly, every person. Lopez’s Henry, then, remaining somewhat true to his literary namesake, also becomes conscious of such passion when pushed to consider the pain of losing precious friends to the AIDS crisis. Cross-generational bonding, the play implies, is a means to rebuild lost social connections, reignite Henry’s passion, and allow the gay men to work together across the party-political divide towards a better future free from oppression.

Look beyond the content of *The Inheritance* itself to the material aspects surrounding its production, of course, and this claim to political nuance is essentially
nullified and the need for more materialist forms of analysis amplified. If potential audience members were in any doubt as to the political bent of those involved with the play’s production, they need only turn to its official Facebook page to observe somewhat obsequious posts dedicated to the former presidential nominee. One of the images posted on the page, for example, in which actor Kyle Harris appears wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the campaign slogan ‘I’m With Her’, reads ‘Happy Birthday, Hillary Clinton! Jasper (Kyle Harris) is with you now and forever’ (The Inheritance Play, ‘Happy Birthday’ [Facebook Post]). This sentiment is similar in tone to references made by the young men about Clinton within The Inheritance itself and serves as evidence of its underlying (neoliberal) political message. Tristan, for example, exclaims ‘My girl’s gonna win!’ (Lopez, The Inheritance 86) during one of the play’s several political discussions, whilst a scene involving the 2016 election results saw the young men don ‘I’m with Her’ garments and wave campaign flags supportive of the Democratic candidate in both London productions. The group claims a kind of ownership over Clinton as a quasi-matriarchal symbol of their politics and demonstrates their allegiance to the progressive neoliberalism Fraser delineates.

In some ways, the strength of their allegiance can be read as Hillary Clinton’s consecration into what D. Gilson conceptualises as a kind of neoliberal ‘divahood’. Gilson argues that the rise of neoliberalism over the twenty-first century has seen more traditionally defined gay icons or ‘divas’ such as Whitney Houston or Cher increasingly replaced by figures such as Clinton who straddle ‘the line between pop icon and political powerhouse’ (627). Noting that women who reach divahood status are typically required to earn it by turning public tragedy into triumph, Gilson essentially argues that the criteria for ‘triumph’ in an increasingly corporatist world are being modified. Once thought of as a woman who necessarily overcomes public
humiliation to find her talents blossoming within the music industry or in Hollywood, the diva may now simply embody what Fraser terms ‘a meritocratic corporate feminism focused on “leaning in” and “cracking the glass ceiling”’ (‘A Hobson’s Choice’ 42). As Gilson explains, ‘the social mobility of diva-ed celebrities [is comparable] to the “competitive, self-interested individuals” of the emergent political condition’ (62). Hillary Clinton’s trajectory from First Lady of the United States – a subordinated and historically gendered role – to the winner of the Democratic nomination in 2016, may be read by her fanbase as evidence of her unique abilities to overcome obstacles and win power. It should be noted, of course, that the consecration of female celebrities and political figures as divas is multidimensional: it is a complex process that a number of scholars have attempted to unravel through psychoanalytic theory and queer theories exploring the performative dimensions of camp. Ultimately, as Edward R. O’Neill explains in an essay considering the cultural logic of the diva, ‘Gay men and divas, fags and femme fatales: we are bound together by a logic we yet dimly understand’ (11). For the purposes of this study, however, it is useful to observe the willingness of Hillary Clinton’s queer fanbase to deify her as the archetypal self-made woman and symbol of ‘meritocratic’ modern feminism despite the obvious fact that her political powers have historically been boosted by ties to her husband. That Clinton is ‘diva-ed’ in similar ways to gay icons of the past is, I argue, evidence of everyday neoliberalism’s ability to invade and capture virtually all cultural phenomena.

It could be argued, of course, that the young men’s fervent support of Clinton is borne of an urgent desire to avoid a Trump-led administration at any cost. In a political environment where everyday neoliberalism is able to degrade and immobilise leftist movements relatively easily through the seductions of corporatist ‘common sense’,
progressive neoliberalism may *appear* as the most viable weapon against its more reactionary incarnations. As remarked in *The New Yorker*,

*The Inheritance* […] raises alarms about the potential reversal of the legal advances that have been made in L.G.B.T.Q. rights. Audience members of any age or sexual orientation may feel a nightmare being replayed when, in Part 1, the friends gather to watch the 2016 election returns. (Mead)

In other words, Trump represents the ultimate nightmare that may only be countered by the election of Clinton, the only other electoral candidate with a chance of taking office. As explained in the introduction to this study, the Trump administration has made legislative moves regarding HIV/AIDS policy that threaten the wellbeing of the HIV-positive and queer-identified. It has also made moves to dismantle LGBT rights across a number of factors beyond healthcare. As an article for the *Guardian* stated in September 2019,

[s]ince taking office, the Trump administration has sought to reverse healthcare protections for trans people, moved to ban trans people from serving in the military, eliminated rules protecting trans students and pushed to allow businesses to turn away gay and trans customers if they seek a religious exemption. (Levin)

Such vociferous and remorseless attacks are, of course, in line with the reactionary neoliberalism Fraser conceptualises, and exemplify why the young men in *The Inheritance* may attach themselves so fervently to the progressive neoliberalism offered by Hillary Clinton.
The ways in which this attachment relates to anxieties surrounding Trump are best exemplified by a diatribe against Henry’s decision to contribute to the President’s campaign fund launched by Tristan, a young HIV-positive physician:

If America is a body, then that man you gave money to is HIV: an opportunistic infection that has invaded a compromised nation at its cellular level and that is now destroying its ability to defend itself by replicating its genetic material from person to person, across the entire nation. HIV may be treated at the cellular level, but it affects the entire body. And individuals alone cannot cure what ails this country. It requires a community response. (Lopez, *The Inheritance* 168)

It should be noted, first of all, that Tristan’s extended metaphor does not quite work here. HIV is not, in fact, an opportunistic infection. Rather, it is a retrovirus that weakens the immune system and renders an infected person increasingly more susceptible to opportunistic infections that would not otherwise have made them ill. Disregard this relatively minor misconception, however, and the metaphor clearly reveals something of how Tristan makes sense of the Trump phenomenon and the era of reactionary populism through which he is currently living. The notion that people are made into Trump supporters and sympathisers via the replication of genetic material suggests that they comprise their own community unit bounded by quasi-familial bonds. In some ways, this could be seen to parallel the kinship structures of the men in the play who frequently espouse everyday neoliberal notions surrounding duty, kinship and the privatisation of care. As the official website for *The Inheritance* states in bold letters on its homepage, the play represents an examination of ‘how much we owe to those who lived and loved before us, and questions the role we must play for future generations’ (The Inheritance Play, ‘Official Broadway Site’), particularly
considering the ways in which reactionary neoliberalism threatens to eviscerate the rights older queer people worked so hard to secure. In conceptualising both groups as delimited by kinship – as warring families, perhaps – the young men make sense of the contemporary political moment via identitarian forms of politics somewhat insensible of the ways in which class concerns and neoliberalism’s track record of immiserating poorer echelons of society laid the groundwork for Trump’s election victory. To clarify, figuring Trump alone as the malignant pathogen behind the rise of reactionary neoliberalism is to ignore the ways in which previous administrations – including those headed by Democrats – have executed a slew of neoliberal policies siphoning both money and power into the hands of the already-wealthy and away from poorer members of the citizenry. To metaphorise Trump-voting US citizens as diseased or infected situates the misogyny, racism and homophobia espoused by the President within their very cells, essentialising the Trump voter as passively susceptible to opportunistic malignancies. As marking themselves out as members of the ‘disease-free community’, the young men conceptualise the idea of political affiliation not as a complex and ongoing process of grappling with hegemonising forces and one’s material conditions, but as a simple case of intrinsic identity. By conceptualising the citizenry as essentially split into the ‘infected’ and the ‘healthy’, then, Tristan’s metaphor reflects what Fraser views as

a toxic environment that appears to validate the view, held by some progressives, that all Trump voters are “deplorables”—irredeemable racists, misogynists, and homophobes. Also reinforced is the converse view, held by many reactionary populists, that all progressives are incorrigible moralizers and smug elitists who look down on them while sipping lattes and raking in the bucks. (‘From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump’
Both views only serve to uphold the tired neoliberal hegemonic bloc by strengthening its bifurcated factions of progressives and reactionaries.

Of course, the HIV metaphor in some ways absolves Trump supporters of responsibility for their reactionary political views. By pathologising them in this way, Tristan portrays the supporters as helpless victims whose capacity to comprehend the ‘common sense’ of progressive neoliberal hegemony has been injured. Trumpism has rid them of their rational minds and they require ‘community’ to mobilise and cure them of their ailments. This notion is in some ways redolent of what Fraser identifies as ‘progressive moralism’ within some factions of the neoliberal establishment, ‘which routinely portrays [rural Trump voters devastated by unemployment] as culturally backward. Rejecting globalization, Trump voters also repudiated the liberal cosmopolitanism identified with it’ (‘A Hobson’s Choice’ 43). Indeed, anxieties surrounding so-called ‘high culture’ and the importance of being ‘cultured’ (particularly within circles of metropolitan gay men) course throughout The Inheritance. Although Trump-sympathising Henry’s extraordinary wealth sets him apart from the rural voters Fraser refers to, he appears to be similarly plagued by an aversion to the kinds of artwork, films and literature that Eric and his friends centre much of their lives around, making broad comments such as ‘I find most contemporary fiction glib and self-conscious’ (Lopez, The Inheritance 116). When Henry and Eric’s relationship starts to blossom, Eric makes it his mission to expose Henry to cultural products that he believes will ‘broaden [the] horizons’ of his older friend. As one of the young narrators goes on to explain, ‘Henry’s life was entrenched completely in commerce. Yet in the weeks that followed, Henry spent more time inside theatres, museums and concert halls than he had in decades’ (117). Here, commerce and culture are seen as somehow antithetical, despite their obviously tight-knit relationship (in
which this cultural materialist study is, of course, necessarily grounded). This is, again, a moment in which Lopez’s attachment to a Forsterian imperative to ‘only connect the prose and the passion’ – realms distant from the rational economic – are made clear. Henry’s engagement with the world of business and his desire to accrue wealth have apparently injured his capacities to enjoy the cultural wares New York has to offer and, by extension, extricated him from a community of cultured gay men of which all of the young men seem to be a part. Like his namesake in Forster’s novel who sees civilisation as ‘moulded by great impersonal forces’ (Forster 200), Henry must ignite unrealised artistic ‘passion’ to become a more ‘feeling’ person within the constraints of neoliberal hegemony by enjoying choice cultural products.

In Eric’s mind, his identity as a gay man is intrinsically tied to the realms of art and culture. When contemplating the ways in which HIV/AIDS has potentially affected the notion of gay heritage, for example, ‘Eric wondered what his life would be like if he had not been robbed of a generation of mentors, of poets, of friends and, perhaps even lovers’ (Lopez, The Inheritance 147). By nestling the word ‘poets’ in amongst more general modes of relation such as ‘friends’ and ‘lovers’, Eric grieves for what he sees as the unusually brilliant and, now, forever untapped, artistic talents of a generation of gay men. Whilst it could easily be true that scores of gifted young poets died of AIDS, Eric’s decision to bemoan the collective loss of artistry over other forms of talent appears to essentialise gay men as natural purveyors of high culture. This reveals a certain obliviousness to the ways in which the capitalist structures Eric derides have actually facilitated and informed his own artistic proclivities, as he inhabits a socio-economic position that gives him access to virtually unlimited cultural products. At the beginning of the play, for example, Morgan describes how, ‘through no enterprise of their own, [Eric and Toby] were the inhabitants of an enormous three-
bedroom, two-bathroom apartment with a terrace’ that Eric took over after his grandmother died (11). The couple talk of having scant finances yet appear to live a life of relative luxury: Toby can afford to dedicate his life to writing whilst Eric relays his plans for a season of theatregoing and attending film festivals without appearing to lend a second thought to the costs. The men’s social circle is also confidently au fait with the vernacular and conventions of certain cultural institutions, evidenced, for example, when Adam, describes how he ‘grabbed a rush-ticket spur of the moment’ for a ballet recital (36). The use of the word ‘grabbed’ here, evocative of a rough or snatching movement, reveals Adam’s nonchalant, perhaps entitled, attitude towards his own spectatorship at cultural events: the option to attend the ballet is simply there for the taking, as and when the mood arises. Furthermore, whilst rush-tickets may offer cheaper ticket prices than those booked in advance, they also require buyers to familiarise themselves with the operative conventions of individual theatres such as when and where to queue up or call for tickets, the dates and times of productions, and, of course, whether last-minute tickets are offered at all. This is where the mentorship that Eric mentions comes in. Throughout the play, Eric is preoccupied with the notion and practice of cultural mentorship between his queer kin, educating Adam about cinema of the French New Wave and Henry about German expressionism, and, as demonstrated in his grievances regarding HIV/AIDS, contemplating the mentorship of which he himself may have been ‘robbed’. This mentorship role is, of course, closely related to that taken on by biological parents in more heteronormative kinship structures, imbued with the privatised ‘responsibilities of care’ written into the script of everyday neoliberalism.

Despite the obvious ways in which Eric’s mentorship role is undergirded by narrow, elitist conceptions of taste and class, the political discourse that runs through
The Inheritance barely pays heed to how issues surrounding wealth and class may interact with, and produce, different forms of oppression. In neglecting these class dimensions, the young men of the play are impelled to construct a genealogy of queerness that makes sense of past injustices through other relational factors. They look towards the affective bonds that tie generations together – often strengthened by shared wounds inflicted by a distant, pathologised Other – as well as an apparent shared appreciation for cultural products, essentialising the queer subject as somehow blessed with brilliant sensitivities towards high art. In so doing, the play constructs a crude genealogy of queer ‘community’ pitted against other bounded groups rather than as a porous and often disjointed genealogy of socio-political movements that have countered, and sometimes capitulated to, broader hegemonic structures. It is in this way, I argue, that the young men’s clear adherence to everyday neoliberal doctrine undermines their attempts to address problems surrounding privatisation and the further dismantling of welfare provisions in the US in any rigorous way. It is quite clear that the heritage constructed in The Inheritance is influenced to some extent by the ‘common sense’ of progressive neoliberalism and the political exigencies of a Trumpian moment.

Having established the neoliberal capitulations made in Lopez’s play, then, the question of whether an anti-neoliberal account of queer heritage could have a place on the mainstream commercial stage remains unanswered. A quick look at the marketing materials used to attract audiences to The Inheritance’s Broadway production is enough to reveal the difficulty of such a project, so beholden is the mainstream theatrical institution to the idea that their clientele harbour individualistic proclivities and a kind of hermetic communitarianism. When the play made its transition to the US, for example, a campaign was set up encouraging audience members to, as a rather
cryptic campaign video implores, ‘Tell us a story’ and ‘Tell us the story of us, how we got here’ (The Inheritance Play, ‘Each Has a Story [Facebook Post]). The play’s official website also includes a ‘Community’ page that states: ‘Tell us about a person who has influenced you or your community for the chance to be featured!’, encouraging users to fill out a form, sharing ‘Your Story’, name and Instagram handle (The Inheritance Play, ‘Community’). In some ways, this campaign represents an attempt to cast the play’s net beyond the constituency of wealthy New York gay men depicted in the play, encouraging people from a range of backgrounds to fill the auditorium. It also, however, reinforces the boundedness of the notion of community that we have returned to so frequently in this study. On the one hand, inspiring people to consider the ways in which older generations have paved the way for improved rights and freedoms for certain identity groups serves, in some respects, as an urgent warning to protect their achievements against the rise of reactionary neoliberalism and barely veiled fascistic populism. The urgency of this message could go some way to explaining why so many plays focused on the notion of queer heritage comprise the third generation of HIV/AIDS theatre. On the other hand, however, it is important to question how the play operates politically in such volatile times. As one journalist speculates about Tristan’s metaphorisation of Trump as the HIV virus and his followers as infected cells: ‘In London, the tirade elicited applause; on Broadway, it should bring the house down’ (Mead). The idea of an auditorium of (largely monied) New Yorkers fervidly cheering on Tristan’s assertions that isolate the pathological, tainted ‘communities’ or ‘cells’ from the cultured, healthy ones is, I argue, deeply troubling in that it appears to celebrate the political ‘purity’ and righteousness of those in the room, thus obscuring how the material conditions created by neoliberal legislation may have created such a divide in the first place. It is an image that
destabilises the notion that affective bonding alone, at the expense of a more materialist-oriented political dramaturgy, may effectively work towards a utopic vision of a society free from oppression, particularly in the profoundly divided climate of Trumpian America.

The Gay Heritage Project: Historicising queerdom onstage

By way of comparison, then, we turn to a play that attempts explicitly to address some of the problematic aspects surrounding queer heritage that Lopez’s play avoids. TGHP is a quasi-documentary play following three gay men as they conduct research into a complex question: whether they can claim a form of alternative gay heritage that stands outside that of the conventional familial. As a play that dedicates itself to establishing whether such a thing as queer generationalism even exists, TGHP is interested in unravelling how the evolution of queer politics has been tightly entwined with that of capitalism over the latter half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. Combining the disparate dramaturgical traditions of documentary theatre, autobiographical testimony, farce, and magical realism, TGHP features scenes that span a range of localities and eras as a means not only to reflect on the personal histories and experiences of its creators (known in the aggregate as the Gay Heritage Project Collective) but to investigate how far these experiences correspond with those of other queer people around the world, both past and present. In an introduction to the play, one of TGHP’s writers, Andrew Kushnir, states that he and his collaborators – Damien Atkins and Paul Dunn – figured themselves as ‘creator-performer-investigators working in and with community’ when coming up with its central concept (Atkins et al. xiv). Rather than figuring ‘heritage’ as a coherent and singularly
defined entity, they embraced it as an action: ‘an exchange, a theme party, a social rite’ (xvii). In an introductory section of the published playtext entitled ‘What is Heritage?’, the collective explains that:

Heritage is, or should be, the subject of active public reflection, debate, and discussion. What is worth saving? What can we, or should we, forget? What memories can we enjoy, regret, or learn from? Who owns “The Past” and who is entitled to speak for past generations? (xxiii)

This sentiment represents a call to collectively probe the politics of historicising queer history. Rather than offering any concrete conclusions to the questions it poses, the play simply represents the continuation of, as writer Atkins puts it, ‘a conversation that existed before we came along, that we enjoyed sharing with an audience’ (xxi).

However, whilst the impulse to interrogate the notion of queer heritage is by no means novel, the play’s creators are keen to foreground their awareness that the emergence of gay, lesbian, and queer identities is a relatively recent phenomenon. Any quixotic notion that this triumvirate of gay male playwrights could establish a neat and narratively coherent genealogy of similarly identified gay male descendants – E.M. Forster, for example – is quickly put to rest. Citing John D’Emilio’s seminal essay ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’ and David Halperin’s ‘Is There a History of Sexuality?’ as influential research materials for TGHP, Kushnir explains in the playtext’s introduction that the GHP Collective were forced to let go of certain romantic notions of a queer past as soon as their investigative project commenced. Kushnir describes the sense of disappointment and even grief that he and his fellow writers felt when confronted with theoretical materials that challenged the ‘pride and sense of lineage invoked by things like Ned’s speech in Larry Kramer’s The Normal Heart’ in which a
long list of writers and philosophers from Aristotle and Socrates to James Baldwin and Herman Melville are posited as powerful determinants of queer culture (xv). Of course, as D’Emilio’s essay evidences, the emergence of queer identities should not be so simplistically reduced to a product spawned by the work of a select few. Rather, it must be associated with the relations of capitalism; it has been the historical development of capitalism – more specifically, its free labor system – that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity. (D’Emilio 468)

D’Emilio claims that the increasing expansion of wage labour and decline of household production throughout nineteenth-century America (and, of course, beyond) shifted the meaning of the family from a self-sufficient unit in which every member took on a different kind of productive labour and birthing offspring was seen as an economic necessity, to one which nurtured individual satisfaction and happiness. Releasing individuals from their dependence on the household in this way, D’Emilio argues, supported the separation of sexuality from procreative obligations, creating conditions ‘that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex’ (470). Such an historical materialist approach is aligned with a relatively recent wave of queer Marxist scholarship critiquing the commodification and reification of sexuality by capitalism, as well as its hegemonising effects. As Peter Drucker puts it, ‘queer Marxism has been founding a body of theory synthesizing Marxist concepts like class, reification and totality with concepts from other paradigms like performativity, homonationalism and intersectionality,’ pointing towards a number of post-2000 works including Kevin
Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009) and Holly Lewis’s *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection* (2016) as exemplary of this trend (‘Queer Marxism’).

Whilst many scholars who adopt this materialist approach credit capitalism with clearing a path towards queer political organisation and emancipatory legislation across much of the world, there is also broad consensus within the field that the phenomenon of homonormativity emerged shortly after, working to shoehorn non-normative relationships into the framework of heterosexist and patriarchal institutions that serve neoliberal ends. The free market fundamentalism that undergirds contemporary neoliberal hegemony cannot be untethered from its reliance on a privatised labour force grounded in family and community structures that Drucker claims ‘maintain and perpetuate male domination of women, heteronormativity and other inequitable social relations’ (*Warped* 340). The GHP Collective’s task to chart the ways in which labour market transformations and attendant gay/feminist liberation movements of the twentieth century have shaped the lives of queer generations, therefore, is necessarily complicated by the hegemonic tides of homonormativity and neoliberalism. Certainly, if the queer Marxist texts to which *TGHP*’s creators are ‘indebted’ and have ‘connected with over the years’ (Atkins et al. 157) were, in fact, as persuasive and pivotal as stated, then analysis of the play should, theoretically, reveal an awareness of what D’Emilio delineates as the dialectic at the heart of capitalism: the ‘constant interplay between exploitation and some measure of autonomy’ that assures queer people of their increasing freedoms whilst tacitly curtailing their powers to live beyond normative kinship structures that profit neoliberal hegemony (468). I will examine, therefore, the extent to which the GHP Collective’s willingness to do the work of queer heritage through a historical
materialist lens (despite their initial reservations about relinquishing romantic notions of the past) translates into a coherent political vision compromised by the protean and contradictory qualities of contemporary socio-economics. Undergirding this line of enquiry is a drive to ascertain the extent to which TGHP’s avowedly progressive politics – those of its creators, audiences and the theatre in which it has been staged – are ineluctably compromised by the processes of hegemonic neoliberalism. By dint of my Gramscian approach that treats hegemony as an always-incomplete project determined to inculcate in its subjects a contradictory ideology of ‘common sense’, I argue that TGHP’s gestures towards a queer Marxism are undermined by everyday neoliberalism; a shrouded ideological impasse that hinders the advancement of a leftist politics that contemporary queer Marxists want activists and artists such as the GHP Collective to advocate. It is a politics which starts

from visions of queer intimacy and “families of choice” to define a radical yet unifying approach to the issue of same-sex partnership. This means opposing the privatisation of care and the transmission of class privilege, while exploring new ways of supporting parents and creating flexible forms for intimate relationships. (Drucker, Warped 310)

As will be uncovered, TGHP’s implicitly Marxist leanings are, ultimately, compromised by its creators’ attachments to a romantic homonormativity yoked to neoliberal structures that preclude Drucker’s hoped-for vision of the future.

Before examining how TGHP engages with its noted scholarly influences, it is important to recognise that an avowedly anti-neoliberal politics is not the only trend detectable within the relatively nascent sub-genre of intergenerational HIV/AIDS theatre. Perhaps inevitably, the quasi-familial bonds of kinship that undergird these
plays have encouraged playwrights to focus on the politically galvanising powers of affective display and social bonding between the queer-identified. Take, for example, the launch of *The Youth/Elders Project* in 2016, a five-night run of performances at the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre designed, as stated in the marketing materials, to bring together young and old to create a space where identities, personal histories and queer perspectives get turned into performance. From sex to activism, pronouns to technology, queer vocabulary to queer history to queer futures, this is theatre at its most relevant: part social experiment, part staged conversation, part performance art. (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, ‘The Youth Elders Project’)

By staging conversations based on the real-life experiences of its queer-identified performers, artistic director Evalyn Parry aimed to provoke candid conversations encouraging performers and audience members to affectively identify areas of common ground. In some ways, Parry’s work displays characteristics of the utopian performatives theorised by Jill Dolan and, as mentioned in Chapter Two, which feature in second-generation plays such as Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*. Parry’s play-cum-social-experiment mobilises the affective capacities of performers and spectators to nurture a theatre space suffused with empathy and conviviality; a utopic model for a society uncorrupted by the hegemonic forces that have traditionally served to other and oppress myriad generations of the non-normative. This implementation of utopian performative tools can be seen as reflective of a critical movement referred to as the ‘affective turn’ within the arts and humanities. Popularised around the *fin-de-millénaire*, the movement is characterised by an increased focus on analysing emotions, feelings and affect as a means to understand social and cultural conditions, and is described by Paul Allain and Jen Harvie as having been ‘very important to […]’
feminist and queer studies as well as critical race theory because the historical denigration of the expression of feeling has been linked both frequently and intimately to historical prejudices against women, queers and people of colour’ (149). Parry’s play, therefore, along with a variety of other queer works grounded in intergenerationality, operates as a reclamation of the power of emotions and bonding, transforming affective display from something abject and inglorious to a political tool that speaks directly back to oppressive forces.\textsuperscript{11}

Whilst, on a general level, \textit{TGHP} similarly pushes back against systemic oppression, the writers’ explicit interaction with the field of queer Marxist scholarship evidences dissatisfaction with a politics dependent on the aleatory and highly individualised potentiality of intergenerational bonding and emotion. Merely glancing at the playtext’s bibliography of works that influenced the play is enough to ascertain the collective’s inclination to foreground capitalism as having a powerful influence over the shape of queer lives in the twenty-first century: appearances include D’Emilio’s aforementioned essay, Lisa Duggan’s ‘The New Homonormativity, The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism’ (2002), and Cindy Patton’s \textit{Inventing AIDS} (1990), to name but a few. Although not all of the 31 texts listed are explicitly Marxist or, indeed, would fit comfortably into the category of queer Marxism, most draw lines between capitalistic structures and contemporary articulations of queer sexuality, betraying a materialist politics at odds with the phenomenological bent of the affective turn. The GHP Collective’s (somewhat reluctant) gravitation towards historical materialism is charted in the first two acts of the play. The first act, entitled ‘Can you describe what it is you’re searching for?’ serves to dispel some of the romantic

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Inheritance} can also be seen to adopt such affective tools. Other examples within the HIV/AIDS genre include Jonathan Harvey’s \textit{Canary} (2010) and Outbox Theatre’s \textit{The Front Room} (2011).
interpretations of contemporary queerness harboured by TGHP’s writers. In one scene, Kushnir searches the annals of the Toronto Public Library to find information about homosexuality in Ukraine. His efforts are, however, in vain, and he is disappointed to discover that his Ukrainian mother’s statement that ‘There were no people like you where we came from. There’s no such thing as a gay Ukrainian’ – a reaction to his coming out – appears to be corroborated by the library’s material lacuna (Atkins et al. 15). The scene, then, offers the first indication that the word ‘gay’ is not a term appropriate for universal use, whether in terms of region, time period, or any other situational variable.

This realisation is made most clearly and comically manifest in the final scene of the first act, a so-called ‘image ballet’ of ‘gays in history’. The stage directions stipulate that the ‘ballet’ take the form of music-accompanied image projections featuring, firstly,

*two ancient Egyptians having anal sex. It is the onset of a barrage as more and more images appear, moving ahead in history, until the entire playing area (screen and floor) erupts into a video montage of famous (and some non-famous) gay people, images, and icons from history, bringing us up to the present day. (Atkins et al. 22, italics in original)*

Whilst the playtext does not offer concrete suggestions as to which historical figures should be included in the montage, it does feature an exemplary timeline of photographic images and artworks including: Peter Paul Rubens’ *Saint Sébastien secouru par les anges* from 1604; portraits of both William Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I; a daguerreotype of Abraham Lincoln; photographs of Alan Turing, James Baldwin, Barack Obama and Laverne Cox; and logos for initiatives such as Black
Lives Matter and Australian Marriage Equality. By staging this timeline as a ‘barrage’ of images that fill the entire screen and floor of the stage, an ironical display of ostentatious camp so commonly associated with contemporary gay culture, the notion of gay heritage is shown to be both anachronistic and reductive. Exhibiting such a seemingly disparate array of historical figures whose sexual proclivities varied widely, many of whom would have been unfamiliar with the semiotics of camp, demonstrates clearly the overgeneralisation of ‘gay’ as a generic term in this context. The montage form itself, meanwhile, is a trope so overused within cinema of the 1980s and 1990s as a means to signify growth, development and the passing of time (particularly in coming-of-age dramas) that to a twenty-first-century audience it can easily be read as an ironic signifier. The linear simplicity of the ‘image ballet’ is thus undermined, indicating that the collective is ready to deconstruct its initial notions of gay heritage. Situating this fantastical and comical display at the end of the very first act prepares spectators for a deconstruction of its romantic precepts during the remaining four: once the music has died down, the trio are ready to move on to Act Two: ‘Bad News’.

Such ‘bad news’, of course, refers to scholarly theories that the GHP Collective were newly exposed to during their writing of the play. The first scene of the second act takes the form of a farcical imagining of a television broadcast entitled ‘The Eternal Gay’, a ‘program that affirms gay people have always existed, and searches history to uncover gay stories of gay people who are gay,’ according to its host (Atkins et al. 29). The host’s repetition of the word ‘gay’ is clearly intended to undermine the programme’s lack of historical and intellectual rigour. A character simply known as the Theorist is enlisted to point out the folly in mining history for preconceived conclusions in this way, a method that contravenes the dialectical principles of
historical materialism that form the basis of the GHP Collective’s research texts. As the theorist notes,

You’re taking modern experience and understanding and reading it backwards in time. It wasn’t until decades later, when capitalism and the labour market transformed the function of the family and the structure of society, along with very specific developments in medical and legal discourse, that there was even the availability to assume a gay identity and therefore be a gay person. (30)

This corrective to the Eternal Gay Host’s flawed thinking is, of course, redolent of the dialectical approach to history favoured by D’Emilio and Drucker and scandalises the host’s stable sense of identity in much the same way described by Kushnir in the playtext’s foreword. ‘What happens in the future,’ the host asks, ‘if things continue to change, and we lose this “availability to assume a gay identity”? Could we…disappear?’ (31). The ellipsis in this final question indicates both a sense of shock and an unwillingness to countenance the fundamentally protean nature of queer identity formation in thrall to the tides of prevailing hegemony.

It is in this way that the host represents gay conservatism’s resistance to ideas put forward by a certain Marxist vanguard within the field of queer theory. Populated by theorists such as Rosemary Hennessey and, more recently, Peter Drucker and Holly Lewis, this loose scholarly unit calls for the revaluation of sexual categories and their importance within a politics that works to benefit all subjects disenfranchised by neoliberalism’s atomising powers. Hennessey, for example, states that political organisation under a queer Marxist rubric requires

a process of unlearning that opens up the identities we take for granted to the historical conditions that make them possible. It involves uprooting these identities not just from ways of thinking
that invite us to construe them as natural but also from a history of suffering — the fertile ground for resentment to grow — and resituating how we know them in a different historical frame, a frame that allows us to see how this suffering is the product of a mode of production that outlaws a whole array of human needs. (229)

For Drucker, opening up identity in this way is the first step to moving beyond the constraints of the heteronormative family and the ways in which it supports neoliberal tenets. Inspired by ideas put forward by Marxist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai calling for more open and collective domestic structures, Drucker advocates a queer politics that seeks economic alternatives to the heteronormative family, allowing the security traditionally associated with insular kinship structures to coexist with individual autonomy. He argues that an effective same-sex politics will

require re-engaging with the central issues of socialist feminism – gender, the family and the social reproduction of labour – and showing what is at stake in these issues for LGBT people’s everyday lives and survival. LGBT liberation should be integrated into a comprehensive programme for reproductive freedom and socialisation of childcare and domestic labour – a programme that would clash with the prerequisites for maintaining profit rates and accumulating capital. (389)

At the heart of Drucker’s politics, therefore, is a call to fundamentally overhaul kinship structures that support the neoliberal imperative for constant and robust economic growth.

At times, TGHP demonstrates flickers of a politics implicitly grounded in this drive to renegotiate heteronormative family structures. Most obviously, the writers each offer candid accounts of growing up within family units that treat their identities
as discordant and ‘unproductive’ in some way. Damien, for example, in an analeptic scene that transports the audience back to his childhood in the 1980s, is taunted and teased by his sister and parents for obsessing over figure skating and one of the sport’s well-known celebrities, Brian Orser. Searching for some kind of affective connection or role model that he clearly cannot find within traditional kinship structures, Damien abashedly says ‘I don’t know. I just feel like…like he’s cool, and like…maybe it would be fun to hang out because, like, maybe we would have something in common’ (Atkins et al. 6). The discomfort Damien feels within his family home is palpable, evidenced by dysfluencies in his speech that betray a disorientation within a world that, for a number of imbricated reasons (homophobia, attendant misogyny, and their relations to neoliberal hegemony, to name a few) cannot accommodate his digressions from heteronormative masculinity. Indeed, this familial exclusion is later explicitly articulated and certified by his Uncle Rob, who tells Damien: ‘You’re not a real Atkins, anyway’ (96).

Andrew, too, who has already had his gay identity muddied by the fact of his Ukrainian heritage, finds himself excluded from traditional kinship structures. His mother, he discovers, views this simply as a necessary evil. In one scene, for example, she tells a young gay shop assistant from Calgary that his struggles to fit in with others from the area can be remedied by extricating himself from the province. When he tells her of his ambitions to work in ‘the business side of fashion’, she reminds him that ‘your life is precious and you only get one. My son is happy, I think. But he had to leave to be who he is. Sometimes you have to leave’ (Atkins et al. 98). That Paul and Andrew shoot each other a knowing look when the latter’s mother describes this encounter is evidence, again, of their discomfort with the coerciveness of heteronormative family structures. As well as pushing queer individuals away from
their families, his mother’s emphasis on the pursuit of personal happiness (and economic success) gestures towards neoliberal hegemony’s apotheosis of the individual within a market-oriented society built on competition and growth. Thanks to everyday neoliberalism’s silent influence, then, Andrew’s Ukrainian mother has adopted an outlook akin to that of the capitalistic American Dream because, as Joel Magnuson explains,

> corporate-dominated cultural hegemony has woven itself into folklore or popular beliefs such that markets are seen as freedom, corporations are entrepreneurs, and all forms of innovation, including financial innovation, should not be questioned. These beliefs are deeply attached to the collective brain stem, which leads to strict acceptance of anything that resonates with the American Dream, even if they are destructive, nondemocratic, or blatantly false. (158)

Viewed through the lens of everyday neoliberalism, therefore, Andrew’s mother appears to look out for the best interests of this young man. However, her unquestioning acceptance of his need to leave evinces what Magnuson terms the ‘destructive’ part of neoliberal hegemony. She views heteronormative family structures as more-or-less fixed units of corporate-minded individuals, each with their own (gendered) roles. As an individual whose identity does not accord with such structures, the man must relinquish affective bonds to achieve his fashion business ‘dreams’. In this way, TGHP makes clear some of the difficult decisions queer individuals are faced with when navigating a neoliberal world that ennobles the notion of individual choice and self-sufficiency whilst simultaneously emphasising individuals’ obligations to the heteronormative family.
Despite the GHP Collective’s alertness to, and obvious understanding of, everyday neoliberalism’s insidious effects, however, there are moments when its influence creeps into the play’s rhetoric. This is particularly true of TGHP’s paratextual elements which describe its genesis and development. In the section entitled ‘Brotherhood’, for example, Kushnir describes the play as both ‘an expansion of the self’, a revolt, and a ‘rebellion against the heteronormative hegemony’ requiring ‘a private renewal, a constant healing of self, a questioning of self, a questioning of loves, a questioning of dreams’ (Atkins et al. xix). This therapeutic language of healing and renewal speaks to a culture of ‘self-care’ that, whilst rooted in radical feminist activism, as Inna Michaeli explains, has been subsumed by everyday neoliberalism. Indeed, ‘self-care’ serves as a romantic euphemism for the privatisation of caring responsibilities, ‘obscuring the social, economic and political sources of physical, emotional, and spiritual distress and exhaustion’ and underhandedly depoliticising subordinated groups of people (Michaeli 53). ‘If we are frustrated, sad, or angry,’ Michaeli notes, ‘we mustn’t act on it, get angry together, protest and organize for change. The mainstream self-care discourse invites us instead to breath [sic], meditate, and – if we can afford it – enjoy a day at the spa’ (53). Kushnir’s rallying call here is undermined somewhat by the privatisation of caring responsibilities: according to this logic, freeing queer-identified kin (or ‘brothers’, as the title suggests) from systemic oppression requires transformation and ‘work’ on an individual level first and foremost. It is no accident, I argue, that Kushnir’s introductory message fails to express the ways in which broader institutions and governmental structures must be overhauled to effect liberatory justice for queer individuals: everyday neoliberal thought ensures that the onus is on individuals themselves.
‘Doing’ heritage in this way is reflective of something Meg Luxton terms ‘perverse individualism’: an individualism that encompasses obligatory care-giving both for oneself and others, as well as competitive impulses. This ideology necessarily divides a citizenry into kinship groups concerned with their own flourishing and economic advancement and is resonant with Margaret Thatcher’s often-quoted belief that there is ‘no such thing’ as society – only individuals and their families. However, whilst neoliberal hegemony still rests to a large extent on familial structures tied by the twine of biology, Luxton argues that it has had to adapt ideologically in recent years to accommodate the fact that ‘most interpersonal relationships, including kin, are increasingly diverse and largely voluntary’ (177). One characteristic of this evolution is a valorisation of (or simple reliance on) community structures that, like the heteronormative family unit, depend on voluntary care-giving work that lies outside of the labour market. Certainly, such responsibilities of care abound within *The Inheritance*, exemplified most starkly in the aforementioned cultural mentorship roles adopted by men within its central group of gay male protagonists. However, the rather more diverse queer community Kushnir calls on to fight its own oppression is also shown to be vulnerable to perverse individualism, something best exemplified during moments when the GHP Collective mines the past for activists that had a hand in securing certain freedoms for today’s queer-identified contingent. In a scene that imagines the annual general meeting of a group known as the Sissy Liberation Front (a playfully obvious allusion to the Gay Liberation Front), for example, one of the members proclaims:

Mark my words: each and every one of you is a fucking *soldier*. And the bravest kind. You, like the sissies who came before you, have worn your uniform in your voice, in your hands, in your hips, and you have worn that uniform every day of your life since you
were six years old. And thank god for that. Every gay that is, every gay that was, and every gay that ever will be owes you his deepest gratitude. (123-4)

Such rhetoric is emphatically militaristic. The evocation of gayness as a ‘uniform’, for example, along with an emphasis on intergenerational gratitude that serves to deify members of the Sissy Liberation Front, are reminiscent of the kind of patriotic rhetoric evinced globally by influential political figures during and after wartime. Whilst, to some extent, such militarism is highly ironical (the reclamation of the derogatory word ‘sissy’, for example, perhaps serves to undermine historically homophobic military institutions in Canada and beyond), its clear associations with the notion of duty and obligation to one’s kin clearly support the privatisation of care Kushnir endorses. Indeed, the apotheosisation of the soldier figure reflects the tenets of perverse individualism in its glorification of military service as the quintessence of competitive triumph and exemplary of the self-sacrifice required to protect a wider group, buttressing ‘a commonsense hegemonic ideology based on the fundamental success of self-actualizing individuals’ (Luxton 180).

To understand why the GHP Collective’s self-avowed suspicion of nuclear familial structures seems unfailingly to fall back into subtly exclusionary and, ultimately, neoliberal articulations of queer kinship within TGHP, we return again to the notion of ‘community’ and its links to everyday neoliberalism. Whilst the play offers implicit commentary on capitalism’s ability to rigidify heteronormative family structures and marginalise the queer-identified, it overlooks some of the ways in which neoliberalism influences broader kinship structures. As already evidenced by The Inheritance, community groups are often built around a demographic identifier or shared belief, requiring prospective members to fit certain criteria in order to benefit
from the affectively constructed bonds typically associated with the word ‘community’.

To some extent, the collective is closely attuned to how the queer community has often been constructed through ‘diversity’ programmes that exploit them as consumer-subjects for profit. Kushnir, for example, bemoans that

many straight people are not interested in our sensibility beyond its capacity to improve their lives – whether it be through humour, style, aesthetics, reinforcing the sanctity and value and desirability of their institutions. The capitalist machine is interested in us as a niche, as a revenue stream. (Atkins et al. xviii)

However, this statement is belied by the collective’s consistent impulse to grapple for a coherent and bounded queer community within the play.

In the fourth scene of the fourth act, for example, Damien steps aboard a so-called ‘Gay Heritage Bus’, in which queer-identified people of different races, nationalities, orientations and genders come together to discuss their differences because, as he puts it, ‘we’re all queer – or something in the neighbourhood – and I genuinely feel like that’s something that connects us...’ (87). Noting that he prefers to spend time in the company of the queer-identified, Damien goes on to say:

I know there are straight people who would be frustrated by that dividing line just like I’m frustrated by the dividing line between us. But...I’m here because I’m gay and that’s not nothing. I know it’s not the same thing as race or gender but it’s not nothing. (89)

Whilst the theatrical conceit of the bus represents clear acknowledgement that societal marginalisation cuts across a host of different identity formations, Damien’s analytical and political impulse to figure queerness as an identity category whose oppression can be lucidly compared to that of race and gender grates against facets of queer Marxist
thought. Indeed, a number of TGHP’s source materials foreground the primacy of class analysis in their methodologies and are suspicious of the reification of selfhood that sometimes occurs in identity-based political discourse. As Barbara Foley has argued, within a class-oriented society the population is necessarily divided up into distinct and ultimately abstract categories as a means to ensure that the productive labour of the many continue benefit the few, something evidenced in my extensive discussion of community discourse. To understand how social inequality works and is perpetuated, therefore, requires us to investigate how class-based societal organisation interacts with categories of identity. Foley explains:

To say this is not to “reduce” gender or “race” to class as modes of oppression or to treat “race” or gender as epiphenomenal. It is, rather, to insist that the distinction between exploitation and oppression makes possible an understanding of the material roots of oppressions of various kinds. (273)

Whilst identity-based analysis addresses vital questions surrounding social injustices and inequalities – as Damien rightly notes, these are ‘not nothing’ – a queer Marxist approach asks us to put such analysis in conversation with broader questions of political economy, with a view to producing more effective forms of counterhegemonic organisation.

Such an approach, it has been argued, requires identity groups’ relinquishment of investment in an injured past, something that has obvious ramifications for a project on heritage. I gesture most clearly towards Wendy Brown’s States of Injury (1995) here, which probes the ways in which identity categories are constructed around a sense of woundedness in some examples of leftist discourse. Suspicious of the ways in which politicised identities are articulated against a bourgeois masculinist ideal,
Brown claims that the elimination of such an ideal (which, of course, is an implicit aim within marginalised identity groups) requires forfeiting

a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion, their claims to the political significance of their difference. If they thus require this ideal for the potency and poignancy of their political claims, we might ask to what extent a critique of capitalism is foreclosed by the current configuration of oppositional politics, and not simply by the ‘loss of the socialist alternative’ or the ostensible ‘triumph of liberalism’ in the global order. (*States of Injury* 61)

Theatre and performance scholar Stephen Farrier expresses similar concerns in a paper on intergenerational queer theatre, pointing in particular to the fact that plays within this category tend to include somewhat sentimentalised representations of a queer generational gap left by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Figuring the loss of so many gay men as a wound specific to the queer community, Farrier notes, ‘can be damaging because it subtly posits that proper relations between older and younger people are based on kinship models that are cunningly connected to the terms of the heteronormative familial’ (‘Playing with Time’ 1404). These criticisms ring particularly true during a rather surreal scene in *TGHP* in which HIV is put on trial in a courtroom. After the character Mr. HIV Virus has been found guilty of one hundred million counts of murder by a character simply known as the Judge, Damien is given the chance to air his grievances against the former. Speaking of his formative years, he explains:

There was such an *absence*. And I was seventeen – I was vulnerable, and scared, and I needed role models, people to tell me that it was going to be okay, that I could be an out gay man and still be happy and successful and safe. What I needed was a
community of elders, of big brothers, but…But as a gay man, I was born into silence. (Atkins et al. 116)

The character Mr. HIV Virus is, of course, symbolic of the governmental and institutional structures (such as pharmaceutical lobbies) that failed to act on the HIV epidemic during its emergent years in large part thanks to homophobic/heterosexist stigma. This diatribe, therefore, represents an overtly political attack on the way in which certain lives are valued above others by prevailing heteronormative hegemony. Putting the onus on older gay men as quasi-parental elders to guide him towards ‘success’, however, paradoxically reinforces heterosexist notions of kinship and heritage by valorising the culture of voluntary caregiving inculcated by everyday neoliberalism. Damien’s speech, then, is exemplary of everyday neoliberalism’s ability to silently reinforce heteronormative values and protect them from destruction.

By investing a considerable amount of faith in the notion that bounded community structures can liberate queer-identified people from oppressive powers, Damien is unable to get past the idea that the politics of gay heritage are simply ‘not nothing’, a double negative aptly reflective of neoliberal hegemony’s ability to furtively fold community-based politics in on itself.

Of both plays, of course, it is clear that TGHP’s attempts at a dialectical unearthing of the conceptual history of the gay and queer lend it a more nuanced and coherent anti-capitalist edge than The Inheritance. Within it, the collective demonstrates an astute awareness of how articulations of gay and queer identities emerged in a way inseparable from the development of capitalism as we know it today. That TGHP was staged at a theatre that brands itself as exclusively queer whilst The Inheritance emerged on relatively mainstream and financially lucrative stages is no coincidence. Rather, it reflects the demands of the theatrical market broadly speaking:
the digestible progressive neoliberalism of *The Inheritance* chimes with a nominally progressive theatregoing public preoccupied with opposing reactionary politics, whilst TGHP is permitted to explore the complexities of queerness, albeit in a way that ends up supporting Romantic articulations of communitarian politics. Indeed, despite the GHP Collective’s claims towards a queer Marxist politics, its members are ultimately incapable of avoiding the kind of limiting identitarian politics espoused within *The Inheritance*. In some ways, the failure of their project to put forward any kind of cogent counterhegemonic politics unveils the constraints of queer generationalism to address ongoing problems surrounding HIV/AIDS. Attempting to establish genealogies in this way is, after all, an immanently identitarian move, and precludes the kind of broad, inclusive politics many contemporary queer Marxists such as Drucker deem necessary for loosening the destructive powers of neoliberal hegemony. Even attempting to construct such genealogies also leaves the writers of TGHP vulnerable to falling into historicist modes of thinking that controvert the historical materialist framework introduced at the beginning of the play. To consider what this means for playwrights hoping to subvert the ‘common sense’ traps laid out by neoliberal hegemony and theatre marketisation, therefore, my final and concluding chapter examines how the return to a more dialectical, quasi-Brechtian dramaturgy akin to that of Kushner’s *Angels* could galvanise counterhegemonic ways of thinking far more effectively than the two plays examined here.
Conclusion: After *The Inheritance*: Where next for third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre?

On 20 February 2020, the lead producers of the Broadway production of *The Inheritance* announced that the play’s final performance would be taking place on 15 March 2020, a much earlier date than they were initially expecting. Although no official closing date had been established before this announcement, reports suggest that the production was originally forecast to run until at least June of the same year, when the Tony Awards were set to be taking place (Rooney). Unlike the sell-out run of the play at London’s Young Vic and its subsequent production at the nearby Noël Coward Theatre in the West End, the Broadway show simply failed to attract the swathes of city-dwellers that producers anticipated would pass through the doors of the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, an expectation understandably based on the laudatory reactions of London audiences. While the play had charmed many a critic in the UK, however, with a reviewer from the *Telegraph* even rating it as ‘perhaps the most important American play of the century so far’ (Cavendish), the critical reception it received in New York was markedly less reverent. As a theatre market expert writing for *Forbes* put it, ‘the British import that was once touted as the greatest thing since sliced bread quickly turned out to be toast,’ frequently failing to fill up more than two-thirds of the seats in the auditorium or bring in more than half of its potential weekly revenue (Hershberg). Clearly, something about *The Inheritance* did not sit well with audiences in New York, notably the birthplace and vanguard of some of the most well-known and politically galvanising plays of the HIV/AIDS genre to date. To conclude this study, then, I will argue that the outpouring of critical opprobrium to unexpectedly hit the most highly praised and widely attended HIV/AIDS play since *Angels*...
represents more than just a box office blip or some kind of promotional failure. Rather, it signals a rejection of the progressive neoliberalism the play embodies and, by extension, could represent a hopeful turning point for the politics of the genre on a broader level. To consider what this might mean for the political dramaturgies of future (perhaps fourth-generation) theatre-makers, I will then return to the very play that inspired this study in the first place, Kushner’s Angels in America, as, despite its relative maturity, I detect within it a quasi-Brechtian spirit that could, ultimately, help to tackle the exigencies of the ongoing HIV pandemic and, indeed, the many global political crises with which it is bound up to varying extents.

The Inheritance and the problem of neoliberal market-communities

Only days after the announcement of its forthcoming closure, critics and theatregoers started trying to make sense of The Inheritance’s disappointing box office figures, dissecting both its production and reception in order to ascertain precisely what went wrong on Broadway. Some cited the play’s unwieldy length as a major contributing factor, explaining that,

The production was always going to be a risk. Two parts means two sets of tickets, and at Broadway prices, that's a big ask for potential audience members […] Requesting that people willingly devote either a full day or multiple days to see separate performances is an even bigger ask. (Gordon)

Yet this explanation seems less than sufficient when considered alongside the critical success Angels enjoyed after it transferred from London’s National Theatre to Broadway as recently as 2018, the playing time of its two parts amounting to even
more than that of *The Inheritance*. A more incisive argument that a number of commentators have made is that *The Inheritance* presents a depiction of gay life in New York that the locals found to be at odds with their own values and experiences and, at times, tipped over into the offensive, particularly in regard to its treatment of sex and HIV. The starkest example of this has been singled out as a scene in which young character Adam tells a story about engaging in group sex in a Czech bathhouse. Although he initially describes the experience as ‘the closest I’ve ever been to genuine ecstasy’, the story quickly takes a much less euphoric turn. After realising that he has been barebacking with a number of other men, ‘suddenly their touches felt like violations,’ prompting him to run to a hotel and frantically wash away the sweat, lube, semen and blood on his body, all of which Adam viscerally describes in abject terms (Lopez, *The Inheritance* 76). The disgust that he feels surrounding this act, particularly when it transpires that it resulted in him becoming temporarily HIV-positive and having to take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment, frames non-normative group sex as pathological and dangerous whilst tacitly hailing the merits of same-sex marriage and monogamous love. It also seems to propagate truly archaic notions that HIV operates as some kind of punishment for promiscuous gay men which, as explored in Chapter Two, were circulating widely around the height of the crisis. As one irate blogger suggested, ‘there is a surprisingly retrograde morality to *The Inheritance*, a play that punishes pleasure and indulgence […] If your six-and-a-half-hour gay play has two sex scenes, and both of them end with a character bleeding from his ass, it’s hard not to feel like your six-and-a-half-hour gay play hates gay sex’ (Peitzman).

Another common observation is that the play depicts a gay community made up almost entirely of white men, with Broadway producer Sam Maher noting that ‘the gay community in New York has kind of rebelled against the show…so many gay men
of color were against it’ (qtd. in Hershberg). Whilst Henry, a white Trump supporter, received a considerable amount of stage time, ‘people of color were very minor characters, and they were not front and center’ (Maher qtd. in Hershberg). This is despite the fact, of course, that black gay men are now by far the group most significantly affected by HIV/AIDS in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Such criticisms demonstrate that a significant number of New York audience members were resistant to the play’s neoliberal progressivism and nuclear familial imperatives laid out in Chapter Five of this study. Critique of the play’s racial homogeneity also further undoes Juntunen’s notion, as discussed in my introduction, that US audiences of mainstream theatre are more likely to feel a strong affinity with, or sympathy for, ‘middle-class, white, HIV-positive gay men’ onstage compared to characters who fall outside of this constrictive group (Juntunen 19). Many New Yorkers, it seems, are more aware and, indeed, sceptical of the assimilative techniques used in first-generation plays and in certain sentimental third-generation plays than Juntunen gives them credit for.

Other than Maher, who speculated that ‘it must have [been] a little romantic for London audiences to see New York gays’ and critic Michael Portantiere, who reckoned that British spectators were simply ‘not as critical, because [The Inheritance does not reflect] their everyday lives, and they don’t have ownership over it’ (both qtd. in Hershberg), few critics have sought to explain why the play’s problematic treatment of contemporary gay culture was largely overlooked by London theatregoers or, indeed, what this disparity may imply about how third-generation HIV/AIDS theatre operates in the UK compared to in the US. That The Inheritance attracted such different responses in these localities may seem odd at first glance, particularly considering the ways in which everyday neoliberal values seem to have permeated US culture more
comprehensively than any other country. Apply theories put forward by cultural materialists interested in the institution of theatre such as Williams and Sinfield, however, and a possible explanation starts to emerge. In 1999, having observed the development of HIV/AIDS theatre in both UK and US contexts, Sinfield asserted that whilst US playwrights had produced a glut of subcultural works in urgent response to the stigmatisation of the Religious Right and right-wing media institutions within the country, dramatists in the UK had largely overlooked the crisis. Part of the reason for this imbalance, Sinfield argues, writing from a British perspective, is that HIV did not course through the UK’s at-risk groups to the same extent as it did in the US, as ‘the initial transmission […] was slower and later. We had not developed, or been allowed to have, bath-houses and back-rooms, so knowledge about safer sex arrived in time to hinder the rate of infection’ (342). Certainly, the available data regarding death rates from AIDS seem to corroborate this assertion. As recently noted in an article analysing the vast disparity between US deaths and those in other developed countries, ‘you see that the virus hit the United States early – and hard. In 1982, the first year of nationwide CDC surveillance, 451 people died of AIDS in America. Just five died in Britain’ (Hobbes, ‘Why Did AIDS Ravage the US…’). Whilst the impact of the epidemic was still very much felt by gay men within the UK, the country’s lower death rate and absence of the intensely stigmatising right wing of America’s culture wars meant that British playwrights were ‘more likely to present the epidemic in a wider context, rather than in “an AIDS play” as such’ (Sinfield 326). A contemporary New York audience, then, is more likely to have lived through, or at least been aware of, the ways in which Reagan’s brazenly neglectful government compounded the suffering of gay men dying from AIDS in the city during the early years of the crisis and, therefore, be more sensitive to the ways in which The Inheritance’s ‘common sense’ progressive
neoliberalism retains some of the destructive aspects of Reaganist economics. Furthermore, with US theatres having staged more HIV/AIDS plays than UK venues in the early years of the crisis, including more risqué second-generation productions, New Yorkers are also likely to be more familiar with the genealogy of the genre.

Linked to this historical awareness of the epidemic in New York City is the ongoing concern surrounding the ways in which it continues to affect (primarily queer) members of the citizenry. Since the virus first appeared, New York City alone ‘has lost more people to AIDS than Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland combined,’ and people continue to die in far higher numbers in the US than in other developed nations (Hobbes, ‘Why Was the AIDS Crisis So Much Worse…’). For this reason, ACT UP’s New York chapter has continued to organise protests and make themselves visible on the streets of the city over the past decade. In 2012, for example, the organisation marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of its first direct action with a demonstration calling for an end to the AIDS crisis through comprehensive funding for treatment, prevention, and research (Carroll 187). Although twenty-first-century New Yorkers are dying at much lower rates than they were during the early years of the crisis, the protest was well-attended, attracting over 1,000 attendees including members of other protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, a success Tamar W. Carroll puts down to the physical landscape of the city and its history of civil dissent:

New York’s dense residential areas along with shared municipal services including public transportation and schools and parks, and its long tradition of ethnic and other forms of identity-based organizing, make the city amenable to both neighborhood-based activism and citywide, issue-oriented coalitions. Over the past five decades, inspired by national movements including the black freedom struggle, feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation, New
Yorkers educated themselves, raised consciousness, and took to the streets, enacting participatory democracy. (189)

As both Sinfield and Williams emphasise in their work, the physical environment surrounding a theatre can profoundly impact the types of audiences it attracts and how its productions are received. For example, in an essay entitled ‘Social Environment and Theatrical Environment’, Williams explains how, in the nineteenth century, ‘London grew from the two and a half millions of mid-century to six and a half millions by 1900. Internal transport, in railways, omnibuses, and eventually the underground both increased possible audiences and permitted the physical concentration of theatres’ (133). This new transport infrastructure allowed an increasing number of working-class Londoners to enjoy access to theatre and, as a result of the lessening exclusivity of theatregoing, ‘new dividing lines appeared between “the respectable” and the “popular”’ (‘Social Environment and Theatrical Environment’ 133). In twenty-first century New York, albeit in very different ways, infrastructural elements of the city have also affected how certain theatrical productions are received, its dense residential areas providing fertile conditions for countercultural political organisation and, it seems, creating a cohort of audience members primed to interrogate the ways in which Lopez’s play aligns itself with certain elements of the neoliberal political establishment in the US.

Clearly, then, there still exist considerable pockets of overt resistance to the ways in which neoliberal hegemony continues to marginalise the HIV-positive. Furthermore, the coalition established in 2012 between ACT UP and Occupy Wall Street, a grassroots movement set up after the 2008 financial crash to protest the deep global inequalities fostered by capitalism, demonstrates an ongoing awareness of the ways in which neoliberalism inflicts injustices on a vast range of other constituencies, as well
as an emerging potentiality for cross-organisational solidarity. As Carroll explains, ‘Both movements emphasize self- and group education and promote a critical consciousness regarding social relations, encouraging members to imagine new ways of being in the world and alternative models for organizing society’ (188). Given that this critical consciousness continues to be realised on the streets of New York, therefore, it may seem surprising that third-generation HIV/AIDS plays, for the most part, appear to have drifted decidedly away from the counterhegemonic spirit of their second-generational predecessors. The primary difference I want to emphasise as we approach the end of this study, however, does not lie in the political consciousness of third-generation playwrights (although, as has been shown, everyday neoliberal ‘common sense’ ideas do creep into many of their plays, to differing extents). Rather, it lies in the way this contemporary cohort of HIV/AIDS playwrights has been constrained by the material realities of the continued neoliberalisation of the institution of theatre: governmental budget cuts, increased privatisation, and a sharper focus on the spectator as a consumer mean that artists are often compelled to create work that is carefully crafted not to antagonise the institutions that agree to host them. To do otherwise would be to hamper the extent to which their plays could be disseminated amongst the theatregoing public.

The bind in which this traps some politically-minded performers and playwrights is exemplified by the bitterly anti-capitalist sentiments that run through David Hoyle’s solo performance work (discussed in Chapter Four) in which he bemoans how the neoliberal stage is hostile to the kind of communitarian and affective political organising that he would like to galvanise, a hostility compounded by the ways in which market-oriented formulations of community serve to support hegemonic structures. In some ways, this coercive theatrical landscape represents the
compounding of what Williams identified as late capitalism’s capacity to stifle and suppress emergent cultural movements. As early as 1977, he explained that,

in advanced capitalism, because of the changes in the social character of labour, in the social character of communications, and in the social character of decision-making, the dominant culture reaches much further than ever before in capitalist society into hitherto “reserved” or “resigned” areas of experience and practice and meaning. The area of effective penetration of the dominant order into the whole social and cultural process is thus now significantly greater. This in turn makes the problem of emergence especially acute, and narrows the gap between alternative and oppositional elements. The alternative, especially in areas that impinge on significant areas of the dominant, is often seen as oppositional and, by pressure, often converted into it. (Marxism and Literature 125-6)

Capitalism’s covert impingement on theatre’s relationship with its audience is a good example of the changing social relations Williams identifies. As Liz Tomlin argues in a recent monograph examining what she terms the contemporary spectator-subject, the theatrical institution’s increasing drive to turn profits in a neoliberal landscape has resulted in widespread abandonment of some aesthetically or politically risky forms of theatre and, by extension, somewhat curtailed opportunities for spectators to expose themselves to plays that pose a serious challenge to hegemonic notions. Indeed, conceptualising audience members as consumers rather than active and politically involved members of a wider citizenry ‘is to relocate the artistic work as a commodity […] designed to please consumers who already know what they like and what they want to buy’ (Tomlin, Political Dramaturgies 30). Plays that deviate from the dominant culture in this way, even if they are not directly oppositional, are thus susceptible to suppression if they are not deemed to be saleable. With theatres basing
future production schedules on past box office successes, then, this stasis of the dominant largely endures even if there exists some kind of appetite amongst regular theatregoers for different, more challenging plays.

Within the HIV/AIDS genre, a good example of this suppression can be found in the production history of a relatively recent third-generation play: Tim Luscombe’s *Pig* (2013). The play is centred around a series of gay couples and their engagement with what has come to be known as ‘bug-chasing,’ a subcultural practice whereby gay men who fetishise HIV attempt to seroconvert, often in large groups at so-called ‘conversion parties’. According to an online synopsis of the work,

*Pig* is a play that raises urgent questions about sexuality, disease, death and love. It reaches into the very dark parts of our souls, and asks what love is, and what are the lengths we’ll go to get it. It’s a play for everyone, not just a gay or queer audience, as ‘till death us do part’ is something we all know about. (Luscombe)

The play was premièred at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in 2013. However, as a relatively small queer venue nestled in the heart of the city’s gay village, this was not the play’s originally intended destination, something evidenced by Luscombe’s aim for the play to be ‘for everyone’. As an established playwright driven by a desire to ask probing questions about the practice onstage and to inform a relatively wide audience about its existence, he claimed in an interview to have sent the play around a number of theatres in London beforehand including the Royal Court, the Young Vic, and a number of new writing theatres. However, due to the play’s in-depth exploration of non-normative sexualities all of them rejected the manuscript, with Luscombe even recalling that the Young Vic’s artistic director ‘questioned my sanity,’ believing that the play ‘would get all the wrong kind of publicity’ (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre,
‘Tim Luscumbe Chats about PIG’). The play is not particularly oppositional in its politics, however, written as it is to appeal to an apparent desire for ‘till death us do part’ and as a means to ‘consider whether even the most horrifying acts can be expressions of love’ (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, ‘PIG’), a romantic, nuptial framework that harks back to the conservatism of first-generation plays. In fact, Luscombe was careful to take a critical view of the bug-chasing practice in many ways, citing an interest in the ‘skewed moral attitude’ of participants as a reason for writing the play (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, ‘Tim Luscumbe Chats about PIG’). The reason that it was rejected in London but accepted in Toronto, Luscombe conjectured, was not because it presented political concerns surrounding a conservative backlash but, thanks to London’s lack of dedicated queer venues, because it was deemed to be financially risky. Having never staged a play about bug-chasing before, the theatres could not sufficiently predict that Pig would attract a profitable number of theatregoers who were open to its explicit content or interested in plays about queer subcultural practices, however critical. It is in this way that Pig exemplifies the transformation of the alternative into the oppositional that Williams identifies as characteristic of the capitalist dominant. The central protagonists of the play do not present a real challenge to hegemonic structures as their relationship to the drug-taking and SM practices involved in ‘conversion parties’ is ultimately always haunted by the pursuit of the monogamous romantic love that serves to uphold contemporary capitalism. However, the depiction alone of the subculture that Pig explores was enough, it seems, to render it financially unviable and, by the logic of a market-centric dominant, oppositional in the eyes of theatre professionals such as the Young Vic’s artistic director.

The production history behind Pig raises broader questions about the ways in which an increasingly marketised theatre sector dictates where plays are shown and
who gets to see them, as well as the extent to which challenging political ideas can be encountered and discussed by different groups of spectators. Of the third-generation plays and performances examined in this study, a considerable number, including Philpott’s *Bison*, Hoyle’s *Magazine* instalments, Neil Watkins’ *The Year of Magical Wanking*, and the GHP Collective’s *Gay Heritage Project*, have all been staged at expressly queer venues or festivals, thereby marking them out as specifically for queer audiences and perpetuating the problematically romantic notions of community discussed in Chapter Four. This is consonant with theories put forward by Victor Merriman in a monograph regarding the effects of austerity legislation and theatre budget cuts in the UK. According to Merriman, the neoliberal theatre sector is under increasing pressure to remain profitable by filling auditoriums with bounded market-communities, selling shows to particular spectators that artistic directors can be confident will show up. Divergences from this model represent a challenge to the way in which theatre is currently structured and operates politically:

> Horizontal relationships, in which borders of nation, race, gender, and politics are freely crossed, are incompatible with the neoliberal project, and must be tightly policed where they cannot be eliminated altogether. It is in such horizontal relationships that free association of persons and ideas emerge, in spaces of empathy, exchange, and dissent. They are spaces of challenge, in which circumstances better than those in which capital is fluid and people are fixed may be imagined and created. (Merriman 52)

As demonstrated by the discontent surrounding the racial homogeneity and homonormativity of *The Inheritance*, and the hostility towards marketised communities in the work of Hoyle and Watkins, the appetite for crossing these kinds of identitarian borders clearly weighs heavily on the realm of HIV/AIDS theatre.
Indeed, these recent examples betray what might be thought of as anti-neoliberal ‘structures of feeling,’ a term coined by Williams to describe alternative ways of thinking beyond the dominant culture that are yet to be fully articulated. The notion may seem a little vague and, in many ways, this vagueness is the point: the word ‘feeling’, Williams notes, was chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of “world-view” or “ideology.” It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt. (Marxism and Literature 132)

Structures of feeling do not offer immediately available theoretical models for political change. Rather, they signal a trajectory towards new hegemonic formulations. The affective responses to Lopez’s play, therefore, just like those of the discontented Hoyle and Watkins, may herald new forms of resistance against how HIV/AIDS has so far been addressed onstage in the twenty-first century, potentially even hailing a fourth generation of HIV/AIDS theatre fit to critique the neoliberal ideologies that continue to oppress those with the virus. As explored by Campbell and Gindt in Viral Dramaturgies, a new body of performance work that addresses how HIV/AIDS affects constituencies beyond those of the white, gay, male and wealthy is already emerging in activist, pedagogical and applied theatre settings. Relocating this kind of work beyond the confines of the classroom or community centre to more widely accessible stages – to make them ‘for everyone’, as Luscombe would have it – will, of course, require significant shifts in the current relationship between HIV/AIDS plays, theatrical institutions and counterhegemonic dramaturgies. To begin
understanding how theatre practitioners can go about undermining the neoliberal strictures of the institution on which their livelihoods rely and work towards realising a novel generation, then, we will return to *Angels*, examining how its dramaturgy may continue to offer inspiration for a counterhegemonic politics.

*Angels in America in the twenty-first century: A blueprint for fourth-generation dramaturgies?*

Observant readers may have noticed that I have thus far avoided assigning Kushner’s play a generational category. In many ways, this is because it evades easy categorisation. It is not third-generational, of course, because it was written and produced in the years leading up to the millennium, an era that had not yet witnessed the twenty-first century’s increasingly neoliberal hegemonic formulations. In other words, as demonstrated throughout this study, it was not born into an era punctuated by the market logic of Web 2.0 technology, the millennial renaissance of testimonial and solo forms of performance, and a more deeply ingrained homonormativity that rendered same-sex marriage the standard goal for many a contemporary gay playwright. It is not first-generational in that it does not propagate an assimilative view of gay kinship designed to hail the sympathies of potentially homophobic theatregoers. At first glance, therefore, *Angels* may appear to fit neatly into the second-generational category that Jones set out in the mid-1990s. Its première fittingly coincided with this period, after all, and the play is imbued with the kind of humour and non-conventional staging techniques required to qualify for this particular generation. However, as we have seen, it differs rather starkly in its politics compared to plays such as Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body* or Reza Abdoh’s avant-garde *Bogeyman*, something which has
perhaps contributed to its enduring popularity. Whilst Miller was preoccupied with envisioning a millenarian upheaval of the Republican Party and Abdoh staged visceral, violent, and sexually explicit plays designed to confront audiences with the realities of living with HIV/AIDS, Kushner’s play lacks this explicitly countercultural verve. Instead, *Angels* presents a long rumination about political organisation on the left, invoking historical materialist theories to consider how life could be improved for the queer, the HIV-positive, and other marginalised constituencies in ways that continue to resonate with audiences in a contemporary setting. Indeed, the play’s unrelenting popularity and continued ability to raise pressing political questions despite its dated setting suggests that it employs valuable dramaturgical devices that third-generation playwrights may be able to refine and enhance for their own political ends or even, perhaps, inaugurate a fourth generation better able to resist the clutches of everyday neoliberalism.

The nature of the political split between *Angels* and its second-generational counterparts appears to align with Liz Tomlin’s observation that avant-garde theatrical movements have historically ‘rejected dialectical narratives underpinned by socialist ideas and rather sought to shock audiences out of their habitual modes of perception with theatres that were disturbing, strange and sometimes incomprehensible’ (*Political Dramaturgies* 2). Undoubtedly, this intention to shock is evident in Abdoh’s avant-garde work and that of other second-generation playwrights who explicitly rejected the assimilatory sentiment of their first-generation predecessors and sought to almost violently dismantle the neoliberal artistic establishment of which they were on the fringes. As explained in Chapter One, for example, Abdoh used intensely violent and fast-paced dramaturgical techniques to jolt his audience members out of ‘common sense’ ways of thinking in order to understand the extent to which the destructive
neoliberal policies of right-wing governments oppressed the HIV-positive and other marginalised groups. Plays such as Bogeyman, however, whilst laying the groundwork for political change in this way, did not appear to be imbued with any clear political call to action beyond this perceptual shift. The visceral shock of Abdoh’s dramaturgy could be seen, in some ways, as an end in itself. In contradistinction, Kushner aligned Angels much more closely with the socialist theatre Tomlin mentions, drawing inspiration from Marxist-influenced thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to consider how certain modes of political organisation and discourse might work as counterhegemonic tools onstage. As explained in Chapter Two, Angels differed from other HIV/AIDS plays of the mid-1990s in its figuring of the millennium not as a junctural moment that called for utopian thinking and a consignment of the ‘crisis years’ to history, but as an opportunity to pause and critically analyse the epidemic and what came before it to cultivate a coherent counterhegemonic way of doing politics, informed, of course, by a kind of Benjaminian view of history.

In terms of the play’s Brechtian influences, it should be noted that Kushner did not try to replicate the anti-affective style of Brecht’s Epic Theatre, which encouraged audience members not to connect emotionally with action onstage but to view it critically and rationally as a means of understanding social injustices beyond the auditorium. As Martin Harries notes, it is ‘unimaginable that Brecht might have attempted something like Kushner’s play,’ as Brecht was committed to dramaturgical techniques that clearly revealed their means of production (186). He attempted to alienate or estrange the spectator from the diegetic space onstage to allow them to see through the construction of theatrical illusions. Angels, by contrast, is written in such a way that the gap between actor and onstage character is relatively slim, achieving an illusory quality that makes it difficult for audience members not to become at least a
little invested in the lives and fates of its characters. A Brechtian spirit can be detected, however, as Stephanie Byttebier observes, in the play’s dialectical consideration of how the notion of political progress interacts with broad and infinitely complex subjects such as pain and suffering. Brecht was critical of the common and simplistic notion that ‘a mere universal awareness of suffering can help bridge the enormous separation between distant spectators of suffering and sufferers themselves,’ not least because of the intensely private and subjective experience suffering represents (Byttebier 288). Brechtian dramaturgy focuses, therefore, on highlighting this gap, interested not in offering its audience an empathic insight into the experiences of the sufferer but uncovering the underlying causes of suffering through dialectical staging techniques.

As Byttebier argues, the dramaturgy of Angels is consonant with such a Brechtian dialectic as ‘experiencing pain and witnessing pain are presented as antagonistic, even mutually alien situations’ (289), exemplified most starkly perhaps in the play’s split scenes. Act Three, Scene Two of Perestroika, for example, encourages audience members to compare the physically brutal realities of Prior’s AIDS whilst he undergoes a medical examination with an interaction that takes place between Louis and Belize about power, tolerance and democracy in America. Louis rambles in a confused way about race and identity, exclaiming,

Racists just try to use race here as a tool in political struggle…there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people—. (Kushner 104)
Such an argument represents the antithesis to a historical materialist reading of America’s political landscape, revealing an utter disregard for the material bases on which the oppression of marginalised groups (including, of course, the HIV-positive) have been built over decades and centuries. Interpenetrating this sprawling rant, meanwhile, is a scene in which Prior strips naked to unveil a host of new lesions to his nurse, providing a visceral and visual counterpoint to the idealist notions of political progress put forward by Louis, who has not borne the brunt of horrors inflicted by Reaganist governance in the US and, perhaps tellingly, confesses to possessing a ‘neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant progress towards happiness of perfection or something’ early on in the play (25). The experiential gap between those in pain and those around them, who are free to simply intellectualise the nature of such misery, therefore, foregrounds ‘the enormous difficulty of solidarity in a world replete with suffering’ (Byttebier 289), pushing audience members to think beyond vacuous axioms of solidarity and progress to consider more difficult questions about how the suffering with which they are confronted can be addressed or even palliated in tangible ways.

Whilst Angels aligns generally with the anti-normative sentiments of its generational contemporaries, then, it is also robustly undergirded by a combination of philosophical and political theoretical work that comes together to present a call for political organisation absent from second-generation plays of the time: one in which audience members are asked to question, as Charles McNulty put it in 1996, ‘no longer what is the place of AIDS in history, but what of history itself can be learned through the experience of gay men and AIDS’ (‘Kushner’s Theses on the Philosophy of History’ 84-5). Benjamin’s and Brecht’s theorisations on political progress are brought together to ask such a question: the Brechtian inflections of Angels’ dramaturgy go some way
towards making clear the brutal pain of AIDS to those unable to experience it first-hand, which in turn highlights the Benjaminian ‘Messianic cessation of happening’ that the HIV/AIDS crisis represents and undermines a hollow politics of progress. To clarify, moments in which the experiential gap between sufferers and those who claim to fight for their freedoms are successfully recognised represent rare historical junctures that offer a ‘revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’ that Benjamin theorises (254). Whether this kind of dialectical theatre has the potential to effect political change in the context of an everyday neoliberal world is, of course, central to the question of the play’s efficacy as a political text and has been a point of much scholarly contention over the past few decades. David Savran, for example, argues that the play’s counterhegemonic dramaturgies are compromised by an attachment to a kind of American liberal pluralism that valorises identitarian forms of politics at the expense of the play’s materialist imperatives. Cherry-pick certain lines of Angels and it is relatively easy to see how Savran reaches this conclusion. The epilogue, for example, in which Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah directly address the audience, contains ostensibly quixotic or millenarian accounts of the future such as Louis’s ‘That’s what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur’; Hannah’s ‘The fountain of Bethesda will flow again […] We will all bathe ourselves clean’; and, most famously, Prior’s ‘The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come’ (Kushner 288-290). These lines appear to Savran to advocate for an outlook that ‘unabashedly champions rationalism and progress’ in ways that betray an idealist, gradualist politics lacking the counterhegemonic power to realise a world beyond neoliberal America (214). However, as Roger Bechtel explains in an essay rebutting Savran’s claims, it is important to understand Angels in its late-twentieth-century context before
condemning its lack of classical Marxist analysis or for failing to offer hope of seismic political revolution. Such expectations, Bechtel claims, betray a kind of nostalgia for theories no longer applicable to a contemporary political landscape that Kushner sees as lacking a cohesive politics of the left, so eroded has it been by the ‘common sense’ of everyday neoliberalism. Indeed, ‘what Kushner grapples with in his play is the very problem of effecting political praxis in the absence of theory; in a world where Marxism is struggling against its widely-perceived death-blow, realpolitik requires rethinking traditional approaches to “revolution”’ (Bechtel 102).

A good starting point for this transmutation of revolutionary politics, Bechtel suggests, is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), focusing in particular on the pair’s discussion of Gramsci’s interrelated notions of hegemony and the ‘war of position’ that he views as so fundamental to a counterhegemonic politics. Significant political transformation is necessarily processual, say Laclau and Mouffe, with every revolutionary act simply ‘an internal moment of this process’ (161). Any success in the struggle against oppression represents a victory in the war of position. It is important to understand, however, that ‘anti-capitalism does not have necessary links to, for example, anti-sexism; they exist in separate spheres of the social. For these struggles to coalesce into a unified left, a hegemony must be articulated between them’ (Bechtel 117). An awareness of this need to work towards a unified, border-crossing counterhegemonic politics appears to underpin the play’s epilogue, with the four characters debating world affairs ranging from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although disagreement reigns, the group experiences revelatory, politically productive moments of realisation and solidarity throughout the short scene. When Louis equates politics with a kind of miraculous, idealist progress, for example, Belize challenges the purely
theoretical nature of his claim. Hannah then chimes in, resolving this antagonism by explaining that ‘You can’t live in the world without an idea of the world, but it’s the living that makes the ideas. You can’t wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory’ (Kushner 289). As Bechtel explains, rather than resting on the idealist epistemologies Savran detects within Angels, such instances of debate and resolution actually reflect Kushner’s unwillingness to commit to a grand narrative or bounded, unified theory. Instead, the play puts forward a ‘non-theory’ of interconnectedness driven by ‘a praxis of plurality that will, in dialectical fashion, generate its own theory’ (Bechtel 117-8). By dint of the play’s commitment to an ongoing dialectic, then, Louis and Belize soon move on to new heated arguments after Hannah resolves their prior antagonism, something which helps to generate new and productive ways of thinking politically. It is in the moment in which the dialectic freezes, however, that Bechtel identifies a ‘momentary picture of coalition [in which] we can imagine an articulated counterhegemony of the left’ (118).

Similarly, for David Román, this praxis of plurality is exemplified by the generation of the ‘new kinship structure’ of which Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah comprise, along with its deviation from ‘heteronormative reproductive family structures’ (Acts of Intervention 213). This is because the process of building such bonds of kinship is shown to reflect the enduring dialectic Bechtel theorises, with each changing their political worldview over time as they are confronted with their complicity in oppressive or dysfunctional social alliances:

For Prior, this involves an extensive working through and subsequent rejection of the teleology of angelology and a restructuring of his relationship with Louis; for Belize, it involves a confirmation of the powers of love in the midst of racial hatred.
and oppression; for Hannah Pitt, it involves a deliberate divorce from the orthodoxy of heteronormativity; and for Louis, the journey transforms his positivist concept of history into a more direct responsibility toward the “time of the now.” (Román, Acts of Intervention 213)

In this way, Angels laid a kind of blueprint for counterhegemonic political organisation designed for implementation outside the confines of the auditorium. Certainly, Prior’s direct address to the audience, in which he pronounces that ‘The Great Work Begins’, the final line of the play, strongly supports this notion, encouraging the formation of counterhegemonic coalitions across identitarian boundaries to engage in the kinds of dialectical work that Kushner conceives as progress (Kushner 290). It also, perhaps, represents a kind of Brechtian dramaturgical blueprint for creators of HIV/AIDS plays hoping to surmount the neoliberal imperatives of the contemporary theatrical institution.

As demonstrated over the course of this study, however, third-generation theatre-makers have been confronted with increasingly formidable barriers to organising their politics or dramaturgies in this way since the 1990s. As established in Chapter Three, contemporary theatre-makers are compelled to navigate a protean digital world in which ostensibly communitarian online networks are ever vulnerable to marketisation and new technologies such as crowdfunding are easily exploited as a means to endorse the decimation of whatever paltry public funding remains available for artists across much of the world. In a related and perhaps even more complicated way, a praxis of plurality fit for a twenty-first-century socialist politics requires the generation of some form of community that is impervious to co-option by heteronormative, neoliberal dominant culture in the way that Miranda Joseph warns against. In this way, it is vital that the presentation or formation of new kinship structures does not fall into
sentimental or uncritical realms, as is often the case in *The Inheritance*. Whilst Lopez claims to have attempted ‘an examination of class, economic inequality, and poverty within gay community,’ (‘What I Wanted to Say in *The Inheritance*’) the play’s Forsterian insistence on the importance of art and culture in building a world richer in love and empathy, realised most starkly in the strong bonds made between the commerce-driven Henry and art-lover Eric, gestures towards an idealist conception of community devoid of the counterhegemonic dialectics necessary for such an examination to take place. Whilst the bonds between the men may appear similar in their affective strength to those that bring together the group in *Angels’* epilogue, for example, they are not invested in the same kind of counterhegemonic organising: disagreements in *The Inheritance* are conceptualised as things to be conquered or suppressed through the power of love and high art rather than as politically generative tools. This is, of course, antithetical to any incisive examination of class structures. The major difference between *The Inheritance* and *Angels*, therefore, despite both making the case for new communities of kinship, is that the former remains attached to a kind of neoliberal identitarian politics. For a play which spends a significant portion of its runtime examining how the HIV/AIDS epidemic has continued to affect queer constituencies, this manifests most clearly in its failure to sufficiently address the experiences of people of colour. Lopez himself notes in a defence of his decision to cast mainly white actors that,

> while I examine race in “The Inheritance,” it is not one of its central themes. This is a decision for which I have been criticized, but it is a decision that I made consciously as a person of color. It is a consideration that is not asked of white writers, but it is one that writers of color must face with every project we begin. (‘What I Wanted to Say in *The Inheritance*’)


The suggestion that issues surrounding race can be cordoned off into their own separate ‘theme’ in a play purportedly addressing the clearly interlinked issues of class and economic inequality in contemporary New York is a product of such short-sighted identitarianism. Indeed, the thematisation of gayness can be seen in similar light. Throughout the play, gay men are seen to belong to a kinship group bonded by their mission to secure greater freedoms for themselves and their younger counterparts. However, without the praxis of plurality that necessitates the inclusion of broader constituencies working towards such a goal for citizens across borders and identity groups – enacting a fully ‘queer’ materialist politics as Drucker would have it – the men are unable to realise the class-based analysis necessary to do such a thing.

Of course, whilst Kushner’s praxis of plurality may offer a helpful political model for contemporary playwrights who share the anti-neoliberal structures of feeling detected within New York audiences or, indeed, the work of some third-generation theatre-makers, the problem of the constrictive structure of marketised theatre remains. Whilst crowdfunding, tiny budgets, and spectator-consumers may persist as fixtures of the contemporary theatre landscape for now, however, there is still scope for political dramaturgies and organisation within the institution. As Merriman argues in ‘Beyond Repair: A Critical Performance Manifesto’, the polemical concluding chapter of his study on austerity, although the corporate power of theatres means that performance events tend to be framed as simple leisure activities, the fictional action within them always contains some kind of ethical provocation:

Drama, more effectively than purely rational argument, engages both the senses and human ethical capacities. The stuff of the art form is imagery and action; the core appeal of intense onstage moments derives from dramatis personae […] They compel
attention […] by dialogical engagement: being seen to listen and respond to circumstances unfolding as if in real time […] Dramaturgy grapples not only with ideas but with embodied moral and ethical states. Its currency is as much emotion as reason – hence its capacity to grip, as Bertolt Brecht argued in advocating for epic dramaturgical strategies to enable “complex seeing.” Drama worlds can enact, and therefore generate discussion on “how things ought to be,” beyond the tyranny of “the way things are.” (151-2)

Certainly, the political imperatives still very much exist for contemporary playwrights of HIV/AIDS theatre to experiment with the use of ‘drama worlds’ to encourage ‘complex seeing’ in the dialectical way that Merriman describes, and in some ways are being strengthened. Although the AIDS activism and political work that was taking place during the first productions of Angels has changed in terms of its scale and form, the anti-neoliberal imperatives upon which it was built are no less urgent, and the suffering with which Kushner’s dialectical dramaturgies attempted to grapple continues to be made manifest, albeit in different ways and across different constituencies. Whilst the lives of white, wealthy, HIV-positive New Yorkers fictionalised in early HIV/AIDS plays are no longer imperilled by governmental neglect as they were during the 1980s and ‘90s, the ever-widening wealth inequalities that years of neoliberal ideology has inflicted on the US since then has shifted the burden of suffering primarily to the poorest sections of the citizenry. As a 2013 study of the spread of HIV in the US revealed, ‘HIV infection is so closely enmeshed in conditions of poverty that it is […] a pandemic of the poor,’ with the authors noting that ameliorative action such as substance abuse programmes and humanitarian health interventions ‘will mean nothing unless the barriers posed by racism, homophobia, stigmas and discrimination are lifted. Our best chance for reducing the health disparity
[…] will be to address social and structural factors that underlie the HIV epidemic’ (Pellowski et al. 12). So long as this urgent need for an anti-neoliberal hegemonic shift endures, a fourth generation of theatre-makers may well start to emerge within commercial theatre institutions. The widespread rejection of The Inheritance by New Yorkers, for example, appears implicitly to call for the emergence of a fourth generation of HIV/AIDS plays better able to address the exigencies of an increasingly polarised global political arena. Put simply, Prior’s call for the ‘Great Work’ to begin has been rekindled to suit the volatile third decade of the twenty-first century.
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