

AIDS play opens at Universalist

By Frank Reeves

Bill Taormino, a member of the the Provincetown AIDS Support Committee, has produced a play that carries one beyond the cliches about the AIDS crisis to those wrenching stories that sear the heart.

The play, AIDS: The Writing On The Wall, opened last Sunday at the Universalist Meeting House in Provincetown. The play will continue every Sunday until Labor Day.

The play does not have a plot but is a loosely connected series of vignettes and readings. Many of the readings are from journals, letters, and newspaper articles. Some are from the diaries of members of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group.

The music, which in the absence of scenery creates the mood, is from pop singers as different as Frank Sinatra, The Shirelles, and Talking Heads. The sound track, which runs through the play, gives the illusion of scene-changes although the actors never leave the stage.

Taormino is a director and actor with 20 years experience in New York. He said he first got the idea to produce a play about AIDS over a year ago. He began collecting material. Eventually he edited it into a script for a performance piece.

Community theater is a much bandied phrase. AIDS: The Writing On The Wall, is an example of community theater at its best. For though the play is the brainchild of one person, it arose out of the experiences of dozens of people. Some are but to talk dirty to the volunteer answering the phone. The volunteer is exasperated. The more he tries to be reasonable the more the caller plies him with leading questions. Their conversation becomes slightly outrageous and hilarious.



Front: Jim Rann(l.), Ronald Wojciechowski, Jim Shoulberg. Rear: Howard Getman(l.), Michael Duplessis, Pat Bruno, Bill Taormino, Jackie Fuchs, Rollie James Kennedy

For all its barbs at bishops and evangelists, the play probes the issues religion always claims to care about—love of neighbors, serenity and courage in the face of death.

In the final scene, Rollie James Kennedy plays a carpenter who learns the day after his 40th birthday that he has ARC. "I worked for two months, then my health gave out," he says.

"Eventually I went to the AIDS support group. I told them that I wanted someone to hold me. No one did. I never felt so lonely in my life."

At the next meeting he tells the group how angry he is at their indifference and rejection. The group now has a new member, a man who has lesions on his face and an infection in his mouth. The man offers to hug Kennedy. Kennedy is at first afraid. Eventually he kisses the man. "Then I learned what unconditional love was about," he says. "Reach out into the uncomfortable unknown," he tells the audience.

It is said that one day when St. Francis was riding back to Assisi he saw a leper. At first he shrank back in fear. He was horrified that the man might touch him. But then Francis dismounted from his horse. He went over to the leper and put money into his hand. And overcoming his fear, he took the man's hand and AIDS patients. Some are lovers and children of people with AIDS. Some are volunteers on an AIDS hot line. Some are even the nurses whose daily visits to AIDS patients have sadly become part of Provincetown life.

In one scene, Jim Rann reads from the diary of a volunteer with an AIDS support group.

Rann starts off: "I went to see Bill today. His breathing is very slow. It nearly stopped. I got very scared."

A day later: "I bathed Bill from the waist up with his favorite soap. Bill has a hard time swallowing. I crushed his pills and fed them to him with Gatoraid.

A group of friends drop by to cheer Bill, although by this time he sleeps a lot and is fading fast: "It is Sunday and a lot of Bill's friends are in the living room. We're reading cards from his family. We showed Bill the big card from his sister."

Finally there is the inevitable journal

entry: "Bill died tonight.

The play has sharp words for President Reagan, religious authorities, even the mayor of Palm Springs, Calif. When a resident of Palm Springs wants to turn his guest house into a hospice for AIDS patients, the mayor threatens to start a petition drive to force the owner to reconsider.

"It's not that it isn't a good idea," he said. "But what would people think if there was an AIDS hospice in a resort." It's not hard to imagine a similar reaction in this Cape-end resort. Put the hospice anywhere but here.

There are funny scenes. A man calls up the AIDS hotline not to get information kissed it.

Francis then mounted his horse and rode off. Suddenly he turned around, but the man was gone. Then Francis knew he had kissed the Lord.

This is the stuff of legend to be sure. But as AIDS: The Writing On The Wall reminds us, it is in those painful, heart wrenching encounters that we often discover what is deepest in ourselves. We kiss the Lord.

Like many topical plays, AIDS: The Writing On The Wall is sometimes overly pedantic and a bit too preachy. But these are minor flaws. The sincerity of the actors and the powerful stories they tell make up for any lapses.

The play is a valuable addition to the repertoire of Provincetown's summer entertainment. If visitors take time to see the play, they will be entertained. This is the first obligation of any play. But in Provincetown entertainment is not hard to come by. More importantly they will be inspired. This is a rarer grace that even the churches have a hard time in mustering.

The cast for AIDS: Writing On The Wall is Pat Bruno, Michael Duplessis, Jackie Fuchs, Rollie James Kennedy, and Jim Rann.

Stage and house manager is Ronald Wojciechowski. Sound Technician is Jim Shoulberg.

Howie Getman is the sign language interpreter.

Plain and Fancy