



Hoffman, William M. (b. 1939)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Playwright, librettist, and educator William M. Hoffman is best known for his ground-breaking, critically acclaimed play *As Is*, one of the first theatrical works to focus on the AIDS epidemic.

Skillfully mingling humor, indignation, and pathos, *As Is* tells its central story about a man's personal struggle with AIDS, while also denouncing mainstream society for its silence about, and perceived indifference to, the enormity of the AIDS crisis.

The play opened in a New York off-Broadway production in March 1985 (followed a month later by Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, another enraged chronicle of the early years of the AIDS epidemic), and due to its critical and commercial success was transferred to an award-winning Broadway production two months later.

Early Life and Career

William M. Hoffman was born in New York City on April 12, 1939 of Eastern European immigrants. While neither of his parents had a formal education, Hoffman has explained in interviews, "learning was encouraged."

He attended the City College of New York, studying English and Latin. After graduating with honors in 1960, Hoffman went to work for the book publishing company Hill and Wang. As an editor there he helped promote the careers of several prominent gay and lesbian playwrights, including Joe Orton, Robert Patrick, Jane Chambers, Tom Eyen, and Lanford Wilson, by featuring their works in the *New American Plays* series and the pioneering anthology *Gay Plays: The First Collection* (1979).

In the early 1960s Hoffman also met and fell in love with the composer John Corigliano. Sometime after the two men began living together, however, Hoffman was introduced to the playwright Lanford Wilson at a party, and shortly thereafter the two men entered into a relationship. Hoffman and Corigliano subsequently broke up, although they remained friendly.

After meeting Wilson, Hoffman embarked on writing a series of short, experimental plays. The first of which, *Thank You, Miss Victoria* (1965), began as a short story, told entirely in dialogue, which Wilson convinced Hoffman was really a play.

The work concerns Harry Judson, an indolent, self-indulgent young man who, simply to amuse himself, phones a dominatrix in answer to her advertisement in a magazine seeking a male "slave." During the course of their conversation, of which the audience hears only the man's side, Harry is led on a discovery of his true and essential self.

Other early works by Hoffman include, *Good Night, I Love You* (1966); *Saturday Night at the Movies* (1966); *Spring Play* (1967); *Three Masked Dances* (1967); *Incantation* (1967); and *Uptight* (1968).

The 1970s were a rewarding, productive period for Hoffman; he received a series of grants and fellowships that allowed him to concentrate further on his writing. Hoffman earned a MacDowell Colony Fellowship in 1971; a Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities grant, a Carnegie Fund grant, and a PEN grant in 1972; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974; and grants from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1975 and 1976.

Hoffman had a number of plays produced, including *A Quick Nut Bread to Make Your Mouth Water* (1970), which had a structure based on a recipe found in a box of flour; *Luna* (1970); *From Fool to Hanged Man* (1972); *The Children's Crusade* (1972); and *Gilles de Rais* (1975), about the notorious fifteenth-century French nobleman and convicted mass murderer.

Hoffman also wrote several teleplays for the CBS television network, including *Notes from the New World: Louis Moreau Gottschalk*, with Roger Englander, which aired in 1976; *The Last Days of Stephen Foster*, which aired in 1977; and *Whistler: Five Portraits*, which aired in 1978.

He co-wrote, with Anthony Holland, the plays *Cornbury: The Queen's Governor* (1977) and *Shoe Palace Murray* (1978).

Cornbury is a satirical meditation on Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury, the English governor, from 1702 to 1708, of what is now New York and New Jersey, who is remembered primarily for his rumored habit of cross dressing while in office. A purported portrait of Lord Cornbury, which hangs in the New-York Historical Society, depicts a man with a pronounced five o'clock shadow, in provocative contrast to his long white gloves and extravagant blue gown.

According to Hoffman, the play was originally conceived as an ironic retort to the pageantry surrounding the United State's bicentennial celebrations in 1976, as well as an attempt to add a flamboyant new figure to the gallery of political figures in the traditional American history books.

In collaboration with John Braden, Hoffman also worked on two musical reviews, *A Book of Etiquette* (1978), which spoofs high-society manners, and *Gulliver's Travels* (1978), based on the Jonathan Swift novel.

As Is

It was not until 1985, however, with the production of *As Is*, that Hoffman achieved wide critical acclaim and recognition.

The idea for *As Is* originated in the early 1980s, as Hoffman explains in the introduction to the published version of his play, when he began hearing of a "mysterious new disease attacking gay men." At first he thought the initial accounts of the illness were absurd—"a disease capable of distinguishing between homo- and heterosexual men?"—but his concern grew as increasingly more gay men of his acquaintance succumbed to the disease.

Hoffman became infuriated with the silence and seeming lack of interest by various government organizations and the mainstream media about the growing AIDS crisis. "In the early 'eighties," Hoffman explained, "with few exceptions, the main concern of people outside the gay community was reassuring themselves that it was only happening to 'them,' and not to 'us.' I felt isolated from society in a way I never had before." As a result, and as a "sort of therapy," Hoffman began writing scenes for a new play, which eventually became *As Is*.

At the center of the play are Rich, a gay writer dying of AIDS, and Saul, his former lover who returns to care

for him. Hoffman also includes a cross-section of characters, representing friends, family, fellow AIDS patients, and members of the medical community, all played by a small group of actors, which serves as an overseeing, and at times interacting, chorus.

The play opened on March 10, 1985. It was directed by Marshall W. Mason and produced by The Glines, a gay theater production company, in association with Circle Repertory, a theater company founded by, among others, Lanford Wilson. Two months later it was transferred to a Broadway production and was nominated for several Tony Awards, including Best Play, and won the 1985 Drama Desk and Obie awards for outstanding new production.

The play is a deeply compassionate work, driven by outrage and anger, yet Hoffman's writing never gives way to overindulgence or mawkishness. As the *New York Times* theater critic Mel Gussow noted in his review, Hoffman "found exactly the appropriate tone for his subject, a dramaturgical equivalent of the title of the play. He leads us to view the disease, its victims (actual and potential), and its survivors as is, without a gloss of self-pity or sentimentality."

The following year Hoffman adapted the play for a television production, which was first broadcast on the subscriber network Showtime, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, and starring Robert Carradine, Jonathan Hadary (re-creating his stage role as Saul), and Colleen Dewhurst.

The Ghosts of Versailles

In 1980, the Metropolitan Opera commissioned a new work from the composer John Corigliano, which was scheduled to debut as part of the company's centennial anniversary in 1983. That work eventually emerged as the highly-praised opera in two acts, *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

Corigliano chose Hoffman, with whom he had collaborated on several earlier musical pieces, as his librettist and the two men worked on the opera for some seven years, missing their initial deadline. They took as their starting point the third of Beaumarchais's "Figaro" plays, *La Mère coupable* (*The Guilty Mother*), written in 1792; the first two plays, *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro*, served as source material for renowned operas by Rossini and Mozart, respectively.

Hoffman and Corigliano eventually jettisoned the plot, and title, of the play, but retained many of Beaumarchais's original characters, while adding several new ones, including Beaumarchais himself and Marie Antoinette.

In an interview for the *New York Times* given shortly before the opera's premiere, Hoffman said of his work, "I was interested in producing an opera that would stand on its own dramatically . . . the libretto had to satisfy me on a deeper level. To me, the opera is primarily a love story, but it is also about the French Revolution, the nature of revolution in general, the nature of love, and the nature of time."

The work was completed in 1987, and after several further delays received its world premiere on December 19, 1991, the first new opera performed at the Metropolitan since 1967. It was a critical and commercial sensation. Edward Rothstein, music critic for the *New York Times*, noted that the opera "brought camp humor, post-modern pastiche, parody, and effulgent tonal nostalgia to the Met."

In between rehearsals for the opera, Hoffman began working on *Riga*, a multi-media play about the murder of members of his family in Latvia during World War II. The play received its first production in Los Angeles in 1999.

Hoffman is currently a professor in the Department of Journalism, Communication, and Theatre at Lehman College of the City University of New York.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.