

Bless Me Anyway

A Solo Performance of My Own Design

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Abstract

Bless me Anyway- A Solo Performance of My Own Design

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The fight against HIV/AIDS is not over. Since the beginning of the epidemic over 39 million people have lost their lives due to HIV/AIDS related complications. And yet, HIV/AIDS continues to disproportionately affect marginalized populations. Stigma, fear and discrimination run high and force those affected into isolation. Access to medication is difficult and expensive. Under the current administration, Trump proposed diverting money away from HIV/AIDS research to fund detention centers for undocumented children. This crisis is not over. A personal, political, historical call to action, *Bless Me Anyway*, harkens back to the beginning of the ACT UP Movement: to Stand Up. Fight Back. Fight AIDS.

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“Bless me Anyway- A Solo Performance of My Own Design”

Empty bottles of booze, teddy bears, needles, articles detailing the lack of medical care in the prison system, old family pictures, a book entitled *How to Survive a Plague*, a “Silence=Death” t-shirt and other miscellaneous items all sat tucked away in a musty vintage suitcase for over a year. I waited patiently while I gathered more items of inspiration, hoping a neat little bow would appear that would help me tie all of these ideas into a neat little package that would immerge as my solo show. And then two very specific incidents happened that would lead me to “Bless Me Anyway”. Incident number one: a class mate told an AIDS joke. SILENCE. RAGE. Incident number two: I saw a production that in my opinion made a mockery out of the LGBTQ community and washed over the fact that millions of lives have been lost to what some people now call the modern day plague. MORE SILENCE. MORE RAGE. It was at this point that I knew I no longer wanted to be silent about my personal connection with HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ community and that I must utilize my training to develop a tool that can be used in service of fighting stigma, fear, discrimination and various other “isms” that occur within these communities. Needless to say the hope for a pretty bow was unnecessary. I ditched most of the items from the suitcase and began utilizing various tools acquired throughout the program to assemble new material.

With this new goal in mind, I immediately put into practice many wonderful tools we received from Valerie Curtis Newton. What is my imagined beginning? What is my imagined end? What discussion do I want the audience to have afterwards? Events, titles, music,

metaphors, props...The list continues. I also set out to watch as much of Anna Deavere Smith's work as I possibly could, having been inspired by her performance skills and style during our Documentary Theatre exploration first year. I began interviewing individuals who are HIV positive, knowing full well that I was going to go beyond traditional documentary style work. There were many reoccurring themes during these interviews. Fear. Isolation. Discrimination. Stigma. Silence. Not a lot has changed regarding misconceptions of transmission. Families still turn their cheeks. Jokes are still cracked. This is where I began to investigate movement in relationship to HIV/AIDS jokes. What might one be feeling internally when hearing these jokes? What sort of harm is done to those attacked by such hateful words? I derived my inspiration from our movement classes and dance performance by Jeffrey France'. There was also a general consensus that younger generations simply could not fathom what that time was like. Hence, the news anchor delivering the first major New York Times article on HIV/AIDS, Jesse Helms' compilation of various derogatory remarks during his public service, and subsequent news articles moving in to today's current political and social climate surrounding HIV/AIDS resources and funding.

With such specific characters as Vito, the news anchor, and the fictional character of the Latinx man compiled of the interviews, came very specific character work. Each individual had their own physical life, biopsychosocial history and vocal patterns of speech and dialect. Tools utilized were derived from various studied and rehearsed plans in character study, studio, Alexander, dialect projects and vocal exercises experimented with throughout our training. In my previous experience of solo show work, I spent so much time doubting my stories and their relevancy that I would cyclically scratch an entire show that I had written, and start from

scratch. This was a very specific goal for me during this next opportunity: to trust that the work was serving its purpose, allow for it to continue to grow organically, and allow myself time for specificity in the work. This was a goal I was particularly proud of that showcased itself within the dexterity of movement between characters.

My final goal I set out to achieve while developing this piece was to harken back to the very raw, politically charged, revolutionary, action based movement that was necessary during the initial outbreak. Vito Russo's speech from an ACT UP rally was especially charged, as he challenged notions of homophobia, racism, white supremacy, government, passivity, and the list continues. The moment of silence, the opportunity for the audience to speak the names of loved ones who had passed away during and after the epidemic, and list of current statistics served as both a tribute to that time and as evidence that this crisis is clearly not over and is still extremely relevant today. Prior Walter's final plea for life in *Angels in America* served as a final plea for love, acceptance and movement forward in *Bless Me Anyway*. As I developed the tag line for this piece, I kept returning to this: A personal, political, historical call to action. Act Up. Fight Back. Fight AIDS.

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Tricia Castaneda-Gonzales
Solo Show
Final Draft

Bless Me Anyway

Lights up on some terrible version of Rent's "One Song" being projected onto a screen upstage/could also be terrible voice over... Maybe a whimsical light plot. Red and Blue Spot lights on various parts of the stage. Song slowly fades in and up until:

Find
One Song
Before the virus takes hold
Glory
Like a sunset
One song
To redeem this Empty Life

Hard shift to a spot light from the double doors as I interrupt said musical with the following: **PLAGUE. We are in the middle of a fucking plague. 40 million is a fucking plague!**

Transition Light

(**Anonymous**. Every time "Anonymous" is listed, it is the same character.) You know what really pisses me off? A shitty production of Rent, The Normal Heart, Angels in America... I don't know what it is. Millennials, no awareness of, of, of, history? They don't remember what that time was like. This was a movement, a revolution. I guess I don't mean shitty, they just had no idea what the hell they were fighting for. What do directors say? There were no stakes. It's like they were singing about toothpaste or something. I watched every single one of my friends die, while their families turned their cheeks, and these guys don't even know what ACT UP is. They know nothing about AZT. It's like what got us here, to this moment was completely irrelevant. I wanted to stand up and shout, I'm right here. You know, the first time I saw Rent, on Broadway, it was the first time I saw myself on stage. You know the part where their AZT beepers when off, AZT break, you could hear all these beepers go off around the theatre. We all took it together. Not a dry eye in the house. I made it through the show, and then vomited my brains out in the bathroom afterward for at least 20 minutes.

Transition Light

News Anchor Sound Cue

Good Morning. This is New York One. In the Papers. It's July 13th 1981. Today's New York Times reads: Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals. Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer. 8 of the victims died less than 24 months after the diagnosis was made. The cause of this outbreak is unknown, and there is as yet no evidence of a contagion. The sudden appearance of the cancer, called Kaposi's Sarcoma, first appears in one or more violet-colored spots anywhere on the body. The spots generally do not itch or cause other symptoms, often can be mistaken for

bruises, sometimes appear as lumps and can turn brown after a period of time. The cancer often causes swollen lymph glands, and then kills by spreading throughout the body. Most cases involve homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with as many as 10 sexual encounter each night up to four times a week. Many of the patients have also been treated for viral infections such as herpes and hep B. Many patients also reported that they had used injection drugs and LSD to heighten sexual pleasure.

Transition Light

Shift: **Jesse Helms:** Now I hate to use the word gay in connection with sodomy. There is nothing gay about these people engaging in incredibly offensive and revolting conduct that has lead to the proliferation of AIDS. We have got to call a spade a spade, and a perverted human being a perverted human being. I am not going to use the American Tax payers hard earned money to promote sodomy. Reliable surveys say, Mr. President, say that these homosexuals average at least 16 different sex partners per month. A quarantine of people who test positive for AIDS is the only way to halt the spread of this deadly disease. Prison inmates infected with the AIDS virus should be kept in custody after serving their sentences if they threaten to spread the disease to the general population to take revenge on society. I may be the most radical person you've talked to about Aids, but somewhere along the line we're going to have to quarantine if we are really going to contain this disease. We did it back with syphilis and nobody even raised a question!

Transition Light

Shift: **Anonymous.** You know what I think has been the most hurtful? It's the word clean. Someone who does have HIV or AIDS, we're dirty or tainted. I have dirty blood. It's like I have the scarlet letter A on my chest. You know, I dated this guy, oh my god I know, I can date and have sex, like I'm a real human or something, and he was aware of my status. He said it was no problem for him, except that after we would have sex he would wipe his whole body down and anything we touched with bleach water. Mind you, my status is undetectable and he's on prep. Bleach water. People think you can carry it on your shoes, on your clothes. I've had friends ask me not to use their bathroom or play with their kids. You know what? It's the check list. It goes like this. I tell you "I HAVE Aids" Silence..... and then "oh....." Maybe you take a step back. And then I can see you cycling through the various questions in your mind about ways you may or may not have put yourself at risk. Have we shared toothbrushes or razors? How did you get it? Have we made out? Is it in the air? Did you know that during the epidemic some funeral homes wouldn't even take our bodies? Others would, but they'd just throw us in black trash bags and call it good. It's not a pretty death.

VITO RUSSO: You know, since I was diagnosed, my family thinks two things about my situation. One, they think I am going to die, and two, they think my government is doing absolutely everything in their power to stop that. And they're wrong, on both accounts. So if I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from homophobia. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from racism. If I'm dying from anything, it's from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from Jesse Helms. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the President of The United States. And,

especially, if I'm dying from anything , I'm dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me, as a human interest story, only as long as I'm willing to be a helpless victim, but not if I'm fighting for my life. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the fact that not enough rich, white, heterosexual men have gotten aids for anyone to give a shit. Living with AIDS is like living through a war which is happening only for those who happen to be in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes, you look around and discover that you've lost more of your friends, but nobody else notices. It isn't happening to them. They're walking the streets as though we weren't living some sort of nightmare. And only you can hear the screams of the people who are dying and their cries for help. No one else seems to be noticing.

Hard Shift. **Movement Sequence** with Music and Voice Over of the following:

- Don't have phone sex. You might get hearing aids.
- Dude, I'm joking! You can't get aids from a lolly pop! Can you?!
- You know what our office needs? More aids jokes!
- What's worse than being single on Valentines Day? AIDS
- I have a friend who's miserable because he just found out he has aids. I told him to stay positive!
- Laughter is the best medicine. That's why I laugh at people with Aids.
- Life handed me lemons, so I fucked them and gave them lemon-aids.
- Magic Johnson owns everything. Gyms, restaurants, movies, coffee shops and sports teams. What kinda aids he got? Financial aids?
- Why is 6 afraid of 7? 7 has Aids.
- Going to Africa. Hope I don't get Aids. Just kidding. I'm white.
- How do you turn a fruit into a vegetable? Aids.
- Aids, even God thinks you should die.

Transition

Good Morning. This is New York One. In the Papers. It's June 29th, 2018. Prep, which the Food and Drug Administration approved in 2012, replacing the condoms comforting shield. Liberated from the stigma of AIDS, gay men, many people think, are now free to revert to their carnivorous sexual selves. In this rendering, the condom is kryptonite, a relic that saps the virile homosexual of his primordial sexual power. The nonchalant dismissal of the condom today flies in the face of the very culture of sexual health that gay men and lesbians constructed in the 1980's. If a hyper-resistant strand of another life threatening S.T.I. develops, we will rue the day that we forgot the searing legacies of our past. We might also recognize that PrEP has not proved nearly as effective and some strains of H.I.V. have developed resistance to the drug.

Transition

Last Anonymous

Back then, it was a death sentence, spiritually and physically. I got fired from my job. My family started using paper plates and plastic forks. Some doctors wouldn't treat me because they thought I was gonna die anyway. I came to the North West because I thought "if I'm going to

die, I'm going to die somewhere pretty. 22 years of treatment now. I'm finally taking a pill that doesn't make me vomit. You know this is why I still have my beard. I hate beards, but my cheek bone started to hollow when I got sick. There's still a lot of stupid out there about it. I'm not a virus. I'm not a victim. You can't get it from my drinks or my hugs. It doesn't live outside the body. There's still a lot of work to be done but they gotta be willing to listen. I'm open about it because it takes away the weight that anyone else might give it. My story is told in my terms and it's a story of love. In many ways, this was this was the greatest gift I've gotten. It formed me. I'm living my life with purpose. But for those of us who stay silent, it's out of strength. To allow you to be comfortable. But we're all right here among you.

Transition Light

News Broadcast Trump

“My budget will ask Democrats and Republicans to make the needed commitment to eliminate the HIV epidemic in the United States within 10 Years. Together we will defeat AIDS in America.

Good Morning. This is New York One. In the Papers. It's February 16th, 2019. Just weeks after president Donald Trump vowed to eradicate HIV/AIDS in the next decade during his State of the Union address, a new CDC report says progress on HIV prevention has stalled. The initiative goal is to reduce new HIV infections by 90% over 10 years. However, upon hearing Mr. Trump's remarks, many critics weren't convinced he would be able to deliver on that promise, pointing out that the administration's actions have not matched his “rhetoric” so far”. In a statement more than a dozen HIV/AIDS advocacy groups, including AIDS United, and Gay Men's Health crisis, said” We stand ready to work with him and his administration if they are serious. But to date, this administration's actions speak louder than words and have moved us in the wrong direction. The organizations cited the president's attacks on the affordable care act and the proposed cuts to non-defense discretionary spending that have threatened to undermine our efforts to end the HIV epidemic. In it's 2018 proposed budget, the trump administration proposed diverting money away from HIV/AIDS research to fund detention centers for undocumented children.

Transition

Me Center Stage delivering current Current HIV/AIDS Statistics:

HIV and Aids continuous to disproportionately affect marginalized populations and because of the stigmas, the discrimination, because of the fear, people are too scared to get the care that they need. Approximately 1.1 million people in the US are living with HIV. 1 in 7 are unaware that they are infected. This crisis is not over. Men who have sex with men are the most affected by HIV in the US, accounting for 70% of new annual infections and 17% were unaware of their status. this crisis is not over. African Americans are more affected by HIV than any other ethnic group, accounting 44% of all new HIV infections, 1 in 6 were unaware of their status,. This crisis is not over. HIV also disproportionately affects the Latino community, accounting for 24% of new HIV diagnosis. This crisis is not over. Young people ages 13-24 account for 22% of new HIV infections. 51% of these young people are unaware of their status. This crisis is not over. Transgendered people who took HIV tests in 2013 were 3 times more likely to receive a diagnosis than the rest of the population. This crisis is not over. and currently there are over 20,000 incarcerated people are living with HIV In. This crisis is not over. In 2015 6% of new

HIV diagnosis were made up of people who inject drugs and today injection drug use is on the rise. This crisis is not over. In 2017 alone, 1.3 million died of aids related illness is. As of today, 39 million people worldwide have died of HIV/AIDS related causes since the beginning of the epidemic. My mother was one of those 39 million. A 36 year old, lesbian, latinx, drug addicted, single mother of a catholic cop. I'd like to take a moment of silence to honor the following and all those who have lost their lives and for those who continue to survive, live with and fight this epidemic.

Audrey Pilar Castaneda

Robbie Buckmaster

Jessica Kimball

Scott McPherson

Tad Shaffer

The Men of the Chapel Hill North Carolina Community, among them Faygele Ben Mirium and Nate the founder of the areas first home for men with aids who lost their homes.

Cliff Douglas

Ernest

Clement

George

Joseph

Justin

Jestina Herriana

Maya

Freddie Mercury

Rock Hudson

Liberace

Denholm Elliot

Ryan White

Anthony Perkins

Tony Richardson

Howard Ashman

Robert Reed

Michael Peters

Alvin Ailey

Vito Russo whose words were resented here tonight

Steve Michael whose political funeral was held in front of the white house in June of 1998

And any other name you would like to offer.....

For those who continue the fight, I'd like to dedicate the following expert from Angels in America, by Tony Kushner:

(Sitting) But still. Still. Bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help myself. I do. I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much, much worse, but... You see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live. Death usually has to *take* life away. I don't know if that's just the animal. I

don't know if it's not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. So we live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough. It's so inadequate, but...Bless me anyway. I want more life.

(Stand) ACT UP. FIGHT BACK. FIGHT AIDS.

