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Patrick Scully's Walt Whitman show premieres

By **claudepeck** | JULY 11, 2014 — 1:06PM



Patrick Scully poses as poet Walt Whitman. Star Tribune photo by Jeff Wheeler.

POST BY CAROLINE PALMER, SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

Sometimes the best way to learn about an artist is through the perspective of another artist. With **“Leaves of Grass - Uncut”** (<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/stageandarts/265617441.html>) Patrick Scully summons the radical spirit of 19th-century poet **Walt Whitman**. Over the course of the show, which had its first performance Thursday night as part of the **Fresh Ink Series** at the **Illusion Theater**, we learn that the two men have much in common when it comes to defying rules and embracing life.

Scully assumes the role of Whitman, talking through his life story, railing against the puritan morals of his day, lauding the love of other men, extolling his contemporaries (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oscar Wilde) and reading excerpts from his works. Whitman, as portrayed by Scully, is a confident man who explains how he would code his language to escape the wrath of a rabidly homophobic society. Despite these efforts, Whitman’s works were banned and critics were quick to denounce him with their harshest words, which is hard to imagine today given the

significant influence and great beauty of his writing.

But Whitman was undeterred by these obstacles, which explains why he is such a hero to Scully, a proud rabble-rouser himself. With “Leaves of Grass – Uncut” Scully creates an onstage world that Whitman would have appreciated. Seventeen men dance together in tender, sensual and playful moments. In the opening scene they strip down entirely to bathe, setting the tone for an evening about relationships between men and how society has sought to deny them.

The movement itself is based in contact improvisation, which emphasizes the intuitive give and take of dancing with another person. Scully’s company members take great care to support and inspire one another. **Kevin Kortan** makes an appearance as Whitman’s lover Peter Doyle and in one of the work’s more poignant moments they discuss the poet’s refusal to use the pronoun “he” (instead using “she”) in his writing to describe their passionate relationship. Scully shows us that Whitman wasn’t always so bold.

The Fresh Ink series provides opportunities for artists to try out new ideas. Scully still has some work to do with tightening up the production – there are a couple of false endings – but it is a heartfelt salute to Whitman. Without this daring poet’s soaring words and his willingness to take risks in a hostile era, we may never know what it means to “sing the body electric.” Scully is the perfect caretaker for Whitman’s legacy.

“Leaves of Grass – Uncut” continues through Sunday, July 13 (8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 7 p.m. Sun). Illusion Theatre, Cowles Center, eighth floor, 528 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls. \$14-\$19, 612-339-4944 or illusiontheater.org.

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