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Walt Whitman celebrated in 'Leaves of Grass: Uncut'



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Walt Whitman is widely considered the father of free verse, but for choreographer and performer Patrick Scully, the famed poet's most important legacy was that of a gay man.

While he was vilified by some for what they considered "obscene" writing, his work had an enormous impact on the likes of Oscar Wilde and Thomas Mann.

This weekend, Scully is presenting "Leaves of Grass: Uncut," a tribute to Whitman at Illusion Theater in the Hennepin Center for the Arts in Minneapolis.

[Patrick Scully as Walt Whitman in "Leaves of Grass"](#)
Photo by Sara Rubinstein

"I don't think we would have marriage equality in Minnesota if he hadn't written 'Leaves of Grass,'" Scully said on a recent morning in his Nicollet Island apartment. "I'm doing this show to celebrate that. It's important to make those historical connections to understand how we

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got here.”

The show also aims to raise awareness of those battles that are still underway. Scully points to countries that condemn homosexuals to death.

*Fierce Wrestler! do you keep your heaviest grip for the last?
Will you sting me most even at parting?
Will you struggle even at the threshold with spasms more delicious than all before?
Does it make you ache so to leave me?
Do you wish to show that even what you did before was nothing to what you can do
Or have you and all the rest combined to see how much I can endure?*
– Walt Whitman, passage from manuscript

“Leaves of Grass: Uncut” brings together excerpts of Whitman’s writing with Scully’s choreography. He sees the dances as a response to Whitman’s poems, which celebrated male companionship.

“Whitman had this perhaps naïve vision that this concept of manly friendship was going to be the miracle that was going to transform American democracy from an overly materialistic, consumption-based society to something more utopian,” Scully said.

On stage, 17 men will dance together, a sight Scully recognizes is unusual.

“There was a time when men in dance was like men in nursing – the stereotype that this is not a manly occupation. That’s homophobia, plain and simple,” he said. “But a shift has happened in our culture – men are not as freaked out about men dancing as they were when I was a teenager.”

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)



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Just as Whitman was a leader in homosexual expression, so too has Scully been a pioneer in his own right. The founder of Patrick's Cabaret, Scully has championed freedom of expression, and created a space where people of all backgrounds are welcome to try out new work on audiences. In recent years, Scully has devoted his time to focusing more on his own creative process, which resulted — among other things — in choreographing an entire fleet of boats on a river in Potsdam, Germany.

Scully, 60, said his new show is about paying it forward, sharing what he's learned from dancing with such legends as [Remy Charlip](#). Scully performed in Charlip's "10 Men" at the Brooklyn Music Academy.

"So I get to pass that dream — of what positive relationships between men might be like — forward in this show, by passing on what I got from Remy," Scully said.

He hopes the piece will offer a richer insight into the life and mind of Walt Whitman, and how his sexuality played an integral role in his art.

"Leaves of Grass: Uncut" runs Thursday through Sunday at the Illusion Theater as part of the [Fresh Ink](#) series.