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One-man show hopes to illuminate the life of Whitman

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Patrick Scully takes his decade-long embrace of Walt Whitman back to the stage with a new performance

By JAN WILLMS

Bringing the life of American poet, essayist, and journalist Walt Whitman to the stage is something that Patrick Scully has been working on and nurturing for more than a decade. The founder of Patrick's Cabaret will bring his latest one-man show on "Whitman, Leaves of Grass Illuminated," to the Hook and Ladder Theater, 3010 Minnehaha Ave., Oct. 13-15, and Oct. 20-22. All shows are at 8pm except for a 4pm matinee Oct. 15.

Scully explained that his life as a performer has been about performing his own work on stage, most of it autobiographical. "I have dealt a lot with being a gay man in a world that wasn't quite ready for gay people to be as out and as open as I was eager to be," he said.

"With 'Whitman,' I continue to work with these very similar themes, but just on someone from a different historical period—someone whose life has mirrored my own in some ways, but someone whose challenges have been different." Scully considered it an opportunity to work with someone whose name was well recognized but whose sensuality is often not known. He called the one-man play a way to out Walt Whitman in a manner that Whitman would have liked.

"Whitman had a utopian vision of what men's relationships could be, and how that could transform not just locally but the world," Scully said. "He saw it as a balm for the crass materialism that he saw in his time."

"You think about Whitman as a gardener," Scully continued. "He was not only someone who tended his garden but expanded it as life went on. So although 'Leaves of Grass' was his life's work, when he first published it in 1855, it was a very thin volume. When he published the deathbed version in 1892, it was a pretty fat volume. He didn't just add to it. Like a gardener, he pruned and trimmed."

"When I got the idea to work with Whitman's material a little over a decade ago, the first thing I did was create a dance piece," Scully recalled. "There was a segment of a poem he wrote that is a litany of body parts and works its way from the head to the toes. So my first grappling with Whitman was using that poem and dancing to it."



Photo right: In "Whitman, Leaves of Grass Illuminated," Patrick Scully said that the theatrical trick is that everybody has to believe that he, as Whitman, has been allowed to cross back over from the other side. (Photo by Sara Rubinstein)

As Scully explored the material, he realized there was a lot more that he wanted to do than just one dance piece, so his project just grew from there. "I fully believe there are more than a thousand shows on Whitman, and this is just Patrick Scully's show."

The first presentation of his Whitman work was offered in July 2014 at Illusion Theater. It featured Scully and another actor, as well as 18 male dancers and was a mega production. It was titled "Leaves of Grass Uncut." Scully explained that uncut was a play on words, but it shone a light on the way culture has censored Whitman to make him acceptable. Scully took that show to New York and gave several performances there. This summer he did a version called "Leaves of Grass Unplugged," doing the show in friends' backyards. The show at Hook and Ladder will be a premiere of a leaner show, with just Scully live on stage, and the dancers present via video projection onto elements in the set.

"That was my intent in doing the big cast version two and a half years ago," Scully said. "I hired a dance videographer who would come in and shoot the dancers in rehearsal and performance. In that way, I would have rich footage to draw on when I did this show. The excerpts of those dancers create a kind of layering in the process that I had to go through to get to where I'll be in October."



Photo left: "Whitman had a utopian vision of what men's relationships could be, and how that could transform not just locally but the world," Patrick Scully said. "He saw it as a balm for the crass materialism that he saw in his time." (Photo by Chris Cameron)

Although most of Scully's performance art has been as a choreographer, he does not dance in this Whitman piece. But he thinks his presentation would have been different if he had not had his roots in the world of dance.

Scully considers his work with choreographer Remy Charlip to be foundational. He first danced with Charlip in 1984 in New York, and he said he found the experience to be something so heartfelt and so healing that he wanted an opportunity to pay that forward. "I wanted to have a chance to share with the men in this piece some of the delights I had dancing with Remy," Scully said.

In this Whitman presentation, Scully said that the theatrical trick is that everybody has to believe that he, as Whitman, has been allowed to cross back over from the other side. He has about 75 minutes to spend with the audience to talk about how things were.

In order to do that, his text is about 50 percent of words that come directly from Whitman in poetry, letters he wrote, or memories of conversations he participated in; another portion of the text comes from things that other people, such as Emerson or Thoreau, said; and a third of the monologue is language that Scully had to invent to sew it all together.

Over the past few years, Scully has read 55 books by and about Whitman. "The intention was to have a broad enough understanding of him so that if I were doing a show for Whitman scholars, I could morph this show to make it more specifically interesting for them. Or if I'm doing it in Germany, I could make it more relevant to German literature and German writers."

Scully has applied for a grant to present the show to 23 towns in Minnesota, and he will know in November if he receives it. For Whitman's 200th birthday on May 31, 2017, he is hoping to do a large cast version of the show at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City.

"I hope to take this show all over the world," Scully said. He also believes it is a show that he can continue to perform for a long time. "Many think of Whitman as an old man in a wheelchair. Even if I become infirm, I can still do Whitman. I think of Hal Holbrook, who started his one-man shows of Mark Twain when he was only 29, and he has kept doing them all his life. He is now in his nineties."

Scully said he hopes that people who may have seen the Whitman performance with a large cast, or who may have seen the backyard unplugged version, will also come to this show. "I call this version "Leaves of Grass Illuminated" because of the clear reference to shining a light on something, but also illuminated manuscripts with added beauty on the page. And I use the video projectors to illuminate parts of the set."

"I would like to see what viewers think are the advantages of the different versions," he added.

As Scully continues to work and refine his show, he said he might tweak something he wrote. But if the words were from Whitman, he might edit

them but not rearrange the word structure. "I try to stick as faithfully to it as I can," he said.

Scully, who got his master's in 2008 in teaching English as a second language, is currently teaching part-time at the University of Minnesota. But most of his artistic focus is on the Whitman shows. "Right now in my creative life, this pretty much takes up all the space and energy I have," he said. "Recently I have been thinking about other things I might do. There's nothing concrete yet, but little wisps of thought come drifting through my head and then evaporate and drift away."

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