

PATRICK'S PLACE



Staff Photo by Rita Reed

Patrick Scully — performance artist, dancer and ringmaster of the underground — wore his favorite stovepipe when posing in his cabaret.

By Neal Justin / Staff Writer

IN THE CORNER of his home, between a stereo speaker and an electrical outlet, Patrick Scully got filthy.

He dumped dirt and ketchup onto the uneven, white, wooden floor, topping it with sod, flowers and ferns. Then he lay his 6-foot-8 body down and buried himself in the grime.

As the guests took their seats, Scully lay silently beneath the mound, waiting to perform. The improvised piece would probably deal with his life as a gay man, being HIV-positive since 1985, and how everybody expects him to die, but the only thing he knew for sure was his opening line.

As the lights came up, Scully popped his head out of the dirt. "I am not dead yet."

As a teacher, gay activist, performance artist and dancer, Scully may be the leading man of the Twin Cities' underground scene. In 1992 the New York Times listed one of his shows among the year's best dance performances. In the Twin Cities, however, he is best known as a ringmaster.

About four times a month, Scully pushes back the furniture, stocks the refrigerator with mineral water, sets up stage lights and transforms his studio home into Patrick's Cabaret, one of the Midwest's most intimate, unlikely nightclubs. Singers, dancers, performance artists, comics and playwrights gather for an unheated show of mainly unfinished socks.

Photo by Rita Reed



Last summer Scully married Dore Branner (above right), a dancer from San Francisco. Below, Scully, left, has been active in the Radical Fannies, gay-activist street performers.



Scully's career

1975-85. Scully abandons plans to become a doctor and joins Contactworks, a local improv company.

1978. Scully's "Killing Me Scully," a homoerotic poem, reviewed by the Washington Post.

1984. Scully dances in Remy Sharip's "Tan Man" for four months in Manhattan.

1985. As a volunteer teacher at St. Stephen's School, Scully persuades officials to let him use the gym for shows a few nights a month.

1989. Scully moved the show into his house at 525 E. 24th St., Minneapolis, where it gains a reputation as an understating place to try out new work.

1992. Scully's "Two foot lost" and "Queen Thinking" are heralded by New York Times as one of year's dance highlights.

March 1994. Ron Athey performs underground.

Underground's
all-around
performer
Scully breaks
the surface

Scully/ His current path is far from Cleaverish boyhood

Continued from page 1F

"It's a safe place that's crucially tied in the arts scene here, allowing a lot of people to be called artists. It's jump-started a lot of work," said John Killacky, the Walker's performing-arts curator and a close friend of Scully's who used to live in an apartment above the cabaret.

The club, which over the past century has served as a mortuary, potato-chip factory and print shop, looks like a college student's loft. White flakes sometimes twirl down from the tin-pressed ceiling.

Filling the risers near the wall is a collection of mismatched seats: bowling-alley chairs salvaged from a St. Paul Dumpster, bar stools bought at Target, patio chairs, folded chairs, wooden seats from a condemned movie theater, designer chairs on loan from friends. Latecomers have sat on the piano stool or even Scully's bed, until he moved it to an upstairs apartment a few months ago.

Brightly painted tree limbs festooned with twinkling lights cover the funky glass bar. A penguin doll, toy truck and poster of a murdered gay sailor decorate the large storefront windows. Near the bathroom are nails holding Scully's funky hats, including a Soviet air force cap, a green fedora, a jester's hat from the Renaissance Festival and a rainbow-colored floppy stovepipe.

"I sometimes stuff newspapers in it to get maximum rise out of it," said Scully, who looks a little like Richard Harris in "Carnelot" with his hollow cheeks and goatee. "I like to stand out."

All-American boy

Scully had an all-American childhood.

He was born in Worthington, Minn., and grew up in a three-bedroom house in Roseville with four brothers and a sister. His father sold cement, his mother held part-time secretarial jobs. The family sicked almost every winter weekend. In summers, Scully played football and baseball. From fifth grade until high-school graduation, he caddied at country clubs, even worked a U.S. Open.

"I didn't have a childhood that led me in the direction I'm in now," said Scully, stretching his long legs across the floor of his 3,000-square-foot studio. "It was a Ward, June, Beaver and Wally kind of childhood."

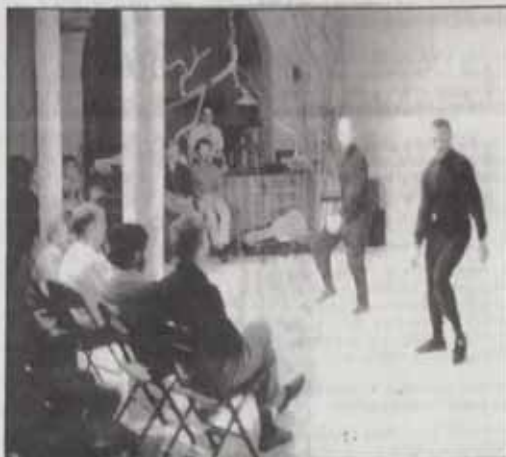
Scully, already 5-foot-2 and 127 pounds in high school, said he associated his crushes on boys with the fact that he felt less physically mature than other kids his age. Uncomfortable in his body, the straight-A student started developing his social skills, joining the debate team and emceeing school variety shows.

"My parents were pretty good about giving me permission to follow my own path, but I don't think they knew enough about what that meant," he said. "It was far enough ahead of their own experiences that I don't think they really had a clue as to how to be supportive."

Still, when it was time for college, Scully seemed headed down the straight-and-narrow path. He set his sights on medicine, majoring in biology at the University of Minnesota and working part-time at a pediatrics and neurology laboratory. He received an Evans Scholarship from a national organization of retired caddies, and lived with other scholarship winners in a fraternity-type house.

Foreign perspective

During a 16-month stint in Berlin, Scully learned about diversity, art



The scene at Patrick's Cabaret is often like this 1992 performance. Craig Logan, left, and Marion Mitchell were the dancers.

urging them to vote against a St. Paul antigay referendum. He spent a year and a half in Washington, D.C., and New York, where he received good reviews for his work, then moved back to Minneapolis in 1984.

Positive impact

Shortly after returning, he was diagnosed as HIV-positive.

"The tests hadn't been out long, and I wanted to know," Scully said. "My intuition told me I was going to be positive — and I was going to be healthy."

Except for telling a few close friends, Scully kept the results a secret for several years, a surprising move for an artist who had already built a reputation for being his soul (and his body) on stage.

"I didn't share it with very many people, in large part because the few that I did share it with, I could tell that they had the expectation that I should get sick," he said. He started to go public with "Too Soon Lost," a one-man show that Killacky calls a "galvanizing piece of work, the first piece by a major artist in Minneapolis on the AIDS pandemic."

The piece intercut film clips of the city's destruction of Block E of Hennepin Av. S. downtown, where Scully had lived during the early 1980s, with personal tales about five friends who had died as a result of AIDS.

He came up with the idea in December 1989, the night before auditioning it to producers of the Walker's and Southern Theater's joint "Out There" series.

"I had already shot footage of Block E being destroyed. I was watching it over and over, and it just made me really sad," he said. "I started talking, and a form was starting to come. Then I thought of the saddest music I could, which is Samuel Barber's 'Adagio for Strings.'"

Without knowing what he was looking for, Scully went down to the basement and spotted the missing piece: "For Rent" signs that had been left by an old boyfriend whose drug use had caused the demise of their relationship.

Scully used a sign as his major prop, likening it to a tombstone.

"The first time I performed it, I felt so sad I almost couldn't find words to physically do it. What was missing was sharing the fact that not only had I lost friends to this epidemic, but I was HIV-positive."

Outing himself on TV

In April 1991 the piece was included in KTCB-Channel 2's "Light From a Dark Room," which featured performances and interviews with several local artists. "I told the producer I wanted to use the opportunity to talk about being HIV-positive. That's as public as a person possibly could be," he said.

"It was an opportunity to come out where I didn't have to be there with each person, to deal with their emotional reaction to it. I don't need that. I don't need anybody to feel sorry, and I was spared a lot of that sympathy by coming out on television."

"Too Soon Lost" was part of a one-man show Scully performed in 1992 at New York's Bessie Schonberg Theater. The show also included Scully's other breakthrough piece, "Queer Thinking," which the Village Voice described as "a combination of coming-out story, flag-bashing war story, and manifesto of an HIV-positive man and recovering autohobo." The New York Times later included the show in its "Best of the Year" list.

It was the kind of rave Scully has never received in the Twin Cities.

Risks before raves

There's a question that Scully could be a more celebrated local artist if he used Patrick's Cabaret to showcase his own talent. But while Scully often performs there, it is almost always unfinished, improvised, experimental stuff, and it often falls flat.

"The cabaret is about being a space for the artists. The audience comes second," he said. "It's a place where the audience comes to be with the artist, to go on the journey, wherever we're going to take them. Sometimes they're going to fail, but unless I give them the room to fail, they'll never exceed my expectations."

Performers love the cabaret because it allows them to take chances in a cozy setting.

"It's really a good place to grow work. It's the most electrical place

to try out new stuff," said Heidi Arneson, a performance artist who has done at least a half-dozen gigs there in the past two years. "Patrick is like the cabaret. He's got this all-accepting aura about him and this open heart."

Scully opened the cabaret in April 1986 at the mustard-yellow gym of St. Stephens School, where he was a volunteer dance teacher. He had a few lights from Contactworks, a dimmer-board borrowed from a friend and candles lit on the long, cafeteria tables. He emceed a show of works by friends he had called from his Rolodex.

He moved the show to his house in May 1989, and lived in the same space until last summer, when he married Djola Branner, a San Francisco dancer he met 10 months ago.

Love's disguise

Branner was performing at the Southern Theater with his troupe Pommo Afro Homos (short for "post-modern Afro-American homosexuals"), when the dancers decided at the last minute to add the character of a drag queen to their show. They had no costume that would fit the 5-foot-3 Branner. Killacky suggested they call Scully, who picked out a blue, stretch, sequined mini-skirt. The two started a long-distance romance.

"There was something about the fit that I had never felt before," said Branner, who popped the question when they were traveling together in Australia.

"I felt like I had fallen out of bed," Scully said. "My head started racing: 'Marry? Why should a queer man get married? That's not what my life is about.' But my heart said, 'Yes. This will be the smartest thing you have ever done.'"

The same week Branner proposed to Scully in Australia, the cabaret was playing host to a show starring Los Angeles artist Athey, whose performance sparked a national debate about the National Endowment for the Arts.

Killacky, who selected Patrick's as the site for the Walker-produced show, said he needed a small, intimate space and felt there was a kinship between the two performers, since they're both AIDS activists.

"I think the people who are opposed to Ron's work are going to be opposed to my work, so we need to be each other's allies," said Scully, who has never met Athey.

Having more media infamy is not a priority for Scully. Other than wanting to direct big-budget movies, he doesn't have any major goals remaining to conquer. His ideal future would see him continuing to put on a low-key show a few weekends a month and provide a place for artists to take chances. "I believe it's possible that I can live to be 95," he said. "I hope it's the most performer-friendly place in town. I think the fear just gets in the way."

At Patrick's

Patrick's Cabaret, 506 E. 24th St., Minneapolis. Shows usually held the second and third weekends of the month. Tickets are \$5. For specific information on show days and times, call 222-2738.

Foreign perspective

During a 16-month stint in Berlin, Scully learned about diversity, art and his own homosexuality. When he returned his senior year, he found it harder to live with his fellow Evans Scholars.

Scully, who hadn't come out of the closet to his housemates, became a minor agitator. He proposed that the house send a gay sweetheart to the Evans Scholars ball. He suggested sending a donation to enemies' orphans during the Vietnam War. "The only way I survived that year was taking on a public persona that was as radical as the Chicago Seven, so people would just leave me alone," Scully said.

He also went against the grain by taking dance lessons all through college. He started performing with a group of students, exploring contact improvisation (the movement of two or more people in a given space). He was starting to feel comfortable with his body. "The dancing felt like coming home," he recalled.

The students with whom he was dancing became Contactworks, which conducted workshops and performed around the Twin Cities. To pay the bills, Scully picked up odd jobs: driving a school bus, putting up drywall, working at day-care centers.

By 1980 Scully had begun to feel it was time to branch out on his own and work with gay artists. He became a political activist and joined the Radical Faeries, street performers supporting gay rights. In fact, he came out to his brothers by