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Patrick Scully

A night of memories unpacked

Dancer and storyteller Patrick Scully charts public and private events of the past 25 years.

By CAROLINE PALMER, Special to the Star Tribune

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Some people are natural storytellers. They skillfully weave personal experiences with universal themes to create meaningful connections. Performance artist and choreographer Patrick Scully has such a gift. His latest project, "Thrive!", is an emotionally rich journey through the 25 years he has spent living with HIV. Examples of survival, loss, hope and time's passage are drawn from Scully's life, yet as we reflect upon his milestones it becomes clear that the dramatic changes of the past quarter century have profoundly influenced us all.

Scully begins in the Patrick's Cabaret lobby with a youthful recollection. At age 15 he broke his leg and while convalescing and saw a televised retrospective of the year's events. In 1968 there was no shortage of news, and Scully learned he was growing up in "a world turned upside down."

The world hasn't righted itself yet, but upon entering the performance space we see a semblance of order within the chaos. Scully's life from 1985 to 2010 is presented on a timeline spanning three walls. Each year lists personal, political and historic highlights including the number of AIDS deaths, Scully's creative projects and his relationships. Hanging T-shirts bear the names of friends lost to AIDS. The audience sits anywhere while Scully roams from year to year, recounting stories, accompanied by music of the era.

This methodical unpacking of memory could become a tedious autobiographical exercise, but Scully carefully selects his defining moments. He develops a narrative continuum that shows personal growth as well as links between past and present. He marks significant cultural shifts ranging from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the expansion of same-sex marriage.

Scully often employs humor but he also unleashes his activist's soul to rage against homophobia. And at times he dances in quiet meditation, slowly pouring his body into the floor. His feet are numb from neuropathy but still Scully uses them to support the soft, swaying movements of his long limbs that echo the poignant resonance of his words.

Midway though the evening, Scully marvels at the heart's capacity to simultaneously hold joy and sadness. Scully's willingness to share all he has learned along the way ultimately exemplifies what it means to truly thrive in this life.

Caroline Palmer writes frequently about dance.



By JAN WILLMS

In 1985, Patrick Scully felt he had been handed a death sentence.

He had been told by a nurse that he was HIV-positive, and he would probably have three to five years before he developed AIDS.

"Back then, a diagnosis of full-blown AIDS was a death sentence," Scully said. "And for many of my friends and colleagues, it was. But I'm still here, doing my best to enjoy life for me and them."

Scully, a performance artist, is sharing that celebration of life with the public in his new one-man show, "Thrive," which will be performed at Patrick's Cabaret, 3010 Minnehaha Ave. in Minneapolis, Oct. 28-31 and Nov. 5-7.

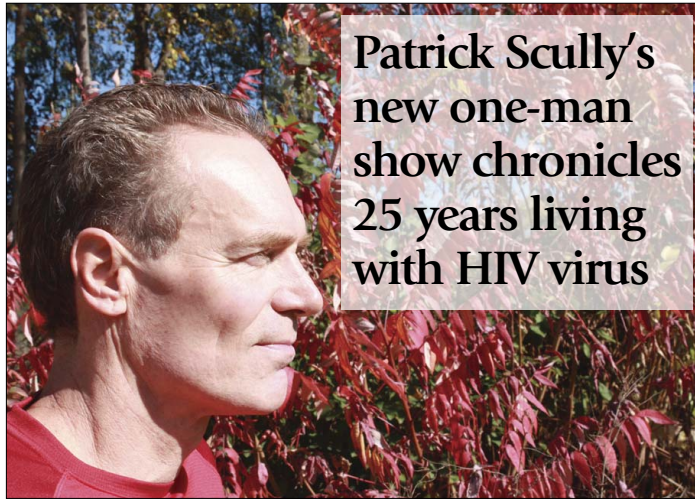
His show will feature a combination of storytelling, dance and music that focuses on the past 25 years of both his personal experience in living with HIV, the friends he has lost and the world events that have framed the past and present.

Remembering that day 25 years ago, Scully said that not a lot was known about AIDS at the time.

"All we knew was that people were getting sick, and some were dying," he said. "The test had only recently come out and was available. I kind of expected the diagnosis. I first came out in 1972 and had been sexually active with a lot of other gay men. This was long before we knew there was anything to worry about, other than generic STDs."

"I was a child of the '60s, very much impacted by the social revolution and Stonewall. By the time we all knew this was a thing to be really afraid of, I figured it was very likely that I had it."

Scully said he had not felt sick at all. He also remembered being angry at the public health



Patrick Scully's new one-man show chronicles 25 years living with HIV virus

Patrick Scully, a performance artist, is sharing a celebration of life with the public in his new one-man show, "Thrive," which will be performed at Patrick's Cabaret, 3010 Minnehaha Ave., Oct. 28-31 and Nov. 5-7. (Photo by Liberty Willms)

nurse. "It seemed like she was telling me with this degree of certainty that I was going to have AIDS," he said. "I don't know whether I was in denial, but I had a background in natural sciences and I knew that not all people reacted in the same way to all viruses."

"In retrospect, I realize she was probably doing the best she could with the information she had at the time."

Scully said it was difficult to find any organization that offered a source of hope. He said that contacting the few HIV support groups in the area was all so secretive and fearful.

"I thought I had not worked this hard to be open as a gay

man to go back in the closet because of being HIV positive," he explained. "The last thing I wanted to do was immerse myself in this environment of fear and secrecy."

He went to one of the HIV clinics in Hennepin County and continued to return every few months for a check-up and to have blood work done.

"I didn't take any medications for the first 11 years," Scully said. "Even when I started taking them, it was because the numbers in my blood work showed a need, not because I felt sick."

He said it took him awhile to figure out how to share his news of being HIV positive.

"I got to a point where I realized I couldn't continue to

process everyone else's reaction to my news with them," Scully said. "It was just too emotionally draining."

When an opportunity arose for him to become part of a program on public television in 1990, he agreed to appear under the condition that he could come out on the program as someone living with HIV. By making his announcement on television, he wouldn't have to be with people in the initial moments he disclosed his condition.

Scully said that as he was making some choices, his cabaret was slowly being built. "It was happening, and I was willingly participating in it," he said.

"I found that being HIV positive was not encompassing my whole life," Scully claimed. "The diagnosis helped me to avoid major and minor golden handcuffs that sometimes seduce us away from our own path in life."

"I made more radical choices to create the performance work I wanted to do," Scully said, "and to spend available cash on travel as opposed to investing it in retirement."

He recalled that his parents were in the first generation in America who planned their retirement, but his mother died at 65 and his dad at 70. "Neither of them had the retirement they dreamed of," Scully said, "and that gave me a unique lens to look at life."



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Scully said his mother died of cancer, and he and she talked about what it meant to live with a potentially life-threatening disease.

"For the last 14 years I have taken meds twice a day," he said. "There is a regularity in that. It makes it kind of hard to forget about it. It's just there as a not very subtle reminder."

Scully said that in his show, "Thrive," he tries to celebrate life

and remember things, both tragic and humorous.

"At some points in working on this show, I have experienced a kind of melancholy, what Freud refers to as unresolved grief," he noted.

"In the '80s and '90s, between the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars, it was so hard and so intense a time," Scully recalled, "that it was difficult to emotionally process. I am taking that time now."

"I went to someone's 60th birthday party, and I couldn't help but think how many might have been at that party if they hadn't died," he noted.

"One of the reasons I'm

doing this show is to bring back what has happened into people's awareness," Scully said. "It's very easy to assume that whatever progress we have made can't be eroded. But we don't need to look back too far in history to see that is foolish. In the '20s and '30s, in Germany, there was a lesbian and gay community as diverse as anything now. That was all but eradicated by the Nazis."

"One of the things I talk about that gives me hope is progress that's been made globally in LGBT issues, not to say that things can't get better," Scully said. "Sadly this country is no longer in the forefront of leading that battle globally but enor-

mous strides have been made."

"We have evolved globally to where nobody publicly embraces slavery," Scully said. He said a time will come when no one will publicly embrace the oppression of women and homophobic views.

"It gives me meaning in my life to be part of making that happen", he said.

He said his show will be highly interactive, and will be different each night, depending on the audience.

"That makes it a great challenge for me," Scully said, "but I am most happy doing things that

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