

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The adventure of improv

A talk with Patrick Scully

- Improvising Movement Music
- Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- Saturday, May 9 at 8 p.m.
- Information (612) 375-7622

By M. Klesow Moore

Six is the magic number. Six men. Six dancers. Six musicians. Six performance artists.

On May 9 at the Walker Art Center, the six—Patrick Scully, Chris Aiken, E.E. Balcos, Eric Coursen, David Edminster, and Carei Thomas—will create a performance work that no one has seen before and never will see again.

Welcome to the world of improvisation, where every moment is an adventure. And not just for the audience but for the performers as well.

One of the six, Patrick Scully, has been doing improvisational performance for the last 20 years.

Scully offered a metaphor of what improvisation is like for him: "If you meet someone you like and he shares an interest in you, you'll plan on having a great conversation when you next meet. You don't decide beforehand what that conversation is going to be like. All you do is say 'let's meet next Tuesday' and then you end up having a great conversation."

Scully was studying biology in 1972 when he signed up for his first dance class. Even though he didn't think he performed as well as it as chemistry and calculus, at the end of the quarter he was asked to dance in a piece for tall people, which became his first performance at the Walker.

After Scully got a scholarship to study in Berlin, he wanted to continue studying dance, but no modern classes were offered. So, a university official said, "Why don't you teach it?"

With a co-teacher who concentrated on warm-ups and technique, Scully took care of teaching improvisation. "By the end of that experience," he said, "I had learned how much I didn't know."

The other significant thing Scully did in Berlin was to come out. "It was so easy to do there, no one knew who I was. And when I came back home I decided I wouldn't be closeted anymore."

When he returned he took a workshop at American University in Washington, D.C. "This was the first time I did contact improv. It was a very important experience." Yet, it was a scary experience for the 21 year old. "It was too erotic. It was more than I could handle."

In 1976, when Scully graduated from the University of Minnesota, he and a



Photo by Glenn Halverson, Walker Art Center

Chris Aiken, Patrick Scully (pictured above L-R) and four others will be improvising Movement Music at the Walker Art Center on May 9.

group of friends started an open contact improvisational group. An ensemble formed, turned professional, and called themselves "Contactworks."

"We were surprisingly wise when we first formed," reflected Scully, "and brought in a social worker to help us with group process, especially in dealing with such intimate work."

In 1980 Scully left the group. "I needed the reality of my life as a gay man to inform the work I was doing." He went first to San Francisco for a month-long workshop, a collaborative project with Erika Thorne in a series entitled, "Nobody Gets Pregnant," then to Washington, D.C.

After brief sojourns in Washington and New York, Scully returned to Minneapolis and started teaching at St. Stephens. With an agreement that he could have use of the auditorium, he started Patrick's Cabaret, which now finds its home within his home. Also at this time, he started working with woodwind player David Edminster and percussionist Eric Coursen.

In 1987 Scully performed "Survival Symptoms" with poet David Lindahl.

"This was the first time I did work on the [AIDS] epidemic." Two years later he created "Too Soon Lost."

"With the connections I made with Arts Over AIDS, I found the courage to be public about being HIV-positive," Scully said.

Two years ago Chris Aiken moved to town from Boston, and the two dancers began improvisational work together. When Walker performance curator John Killacky approached Scully with an idea to do an evening of improvisational work, the upcoming event at the Walker emerged.

Dancer E.E. Balcos expressed an interest in dancing with Scully, and he joined the growing ensemble. "He's danced all over the place," said Scully about Balcos, "and I didn't want to be the only queer voice. The rest of the group is very supportive, but I didn't want to be the only voice."

The other performer—pianist Carei Thomas—will be familiar to many. He performed piano for both the Langston Hughes performance piece, created by Isaac Julien, and Don

Patrick Scully

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Belton's performance piece.

The six performers have been working together twice a week since January. And the performance on May 9 will be approximately the 40th time that the six men have worked together.

Scully was emphatic that this was not "his" piece, that all the performers are of equal importance. The

musicians will participate in the movement, and the dancers will also do music. By blurring the boundaries of who is the dancer and who is the musician, the performers get to the very essence of movement and sound.

When asked if improvisational work is scary, Scully said, "What's scary is when I start getting judgmental in my head. I've come to trust that if you let yourself be in the moment and enjoy being in the

moment, it's going to work. But when you start to control things, the manipulation begins to show."

He very clearly experiences a Zen-like state with his work. "Being in the moment is the core of any good improvisation. And being HIV-positive gives me a heightened sense of that. Like when I started seeing the beginnings of spring this weekend and not taking it for granted."



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