

Regional Reviews: Minneapolis/St. Paul

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man

Illusion Theater

Review by [Arthur Dorman](#) | [Season Schedule](#)

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Patrick Scully knew he was something—something different from other boys, even before he knew that "homosexual" and "gay" were words to describe it. In his one-man autobiographical show, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man*, Scully shares an account of his first three decades, through high school, college at the University of Minnesota (including an impactful study abroad year in Berlin), and the first years of his professional life as a dancer, teacher, and emergent activist for gay liberation in the Twin Cities. The show can be seen—and by "can be seen," I mean "should be seen—at Illusion Theater, kicking off Illusion's celebratory 50th season.

For most of the show's 70 minutes, Scully speaks directly to his audience, describing his childhood experience of searching for clues that people like him did exist in the universe, that there was some context in which his feelings made sense. He finds very few such clues. Among them are entries in two books. One, the dictionary had the word "homosexual" listed among its thousands of entries, offering the reassurance that if there is a legitimate world for his feelings, it must be a bona fide thing. The other book is much more discouraging: the Bible, specifically Leviticus, which includes the command that such men shall be put to death. Young Scully freaks out, thinking, "Put to death? ... even Adam and Eve were only kicked out." Is he something so monstrously bad?

Scully's tale goes on, fleshing out the promise of the title, an obvious riff on James Joyce's thinly veiled autobiographical novel "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," published in 1916. Both writers narrate their agonizing reckoning with a socially untenable aspect of their nature: for Joyce, it is his alienation from Ireland's all-powerful Catholic; for Scully, his deviation from the heterosexual norms upheld by church and state alike. A sampling of Scully's progression includes: during high school, learning that Walt Whitman was gay, and the terror of the mandatory showers after gym class; in college, the uptight living situation he is required to endure, a summer break pilgrimage to San Francisco with the goal of meeting gay people—and failing—and a luminous explanation of how he came to the conclusion that "swimming is the sexiest of sports." Especially pivotal is the transformation he experiences when he decides to register for a class in modern dance.

The saga continues with his life-altering year in Germany, followed by the conclusion of his time in college, his determination to leave aside the long-held assumption that he was headed to medical school, and to see what might happen if he kept dancing for a while. The results are tremendous leaps in self-acceptance, in learning what the life of a gay man could have in store (including his discovery of a phenomena called "gay bars"), professional opportunities that launched a remarkable career, and a growing sense of the power his artistry held to promote the cause of gay liberation.

In addition to his direct, confessionally toned chatting with us, Scully uses his gift for movement to express aspects of his journey, each piece an emotionally evocative illumination of tale. At the age of 70, Scully continues to move with lithe, expressive grace (movement choreography credited to Blake Nellis). Whatever guidance director Michael Robins provided to Scully suits the presentation to a tee, though one suspects it is a very collaborative effort by these two long-time collaborators.

The entire narration is enhanced by slides that depict the people and places Scully introduces us to, as well as historical documents that reference such significant events as the election and assassination of Harvey Milk, Gay Liberation marches, and Anita Bryant's regressive anti-gay campaign. At several junctures, slides are replaced by video footage, including some of Scully's earliest work as a dancer and choreographer—which is beautiful. The video, as well as the exquisitely conceived lighting design, are the work of Garvin Jellison.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man is the first work in what Scully means to be an autobiographical series. Based on the splendor of what the present show offers, I look forward to further installments. And, much as I cherish live performance, I can see this show being made into a beautiful book, with Scully's narration accompanied by the slides to illustrate his story, and the movement segments captured in photographs—not quite as vibrant as the live performance, but offering the ability to look back upon Scully's journey at one's leisure.

Simple in conception, but sublime in its execution, delivering the anguish felt by anyone who has had to strive to discover their authentic self, the euphoria each time a bit of that discovery is made, and the peace that comes with the knowledge and embrace of that authentic self, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man* is a joy to experience. I could not catch the show until its second week of a short run, so there is little time to hesitate. As I wrote starting out, "it *should* be seen."

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man runs through October 6, 2024, at Illusion Theater, Center for Performing Arts, 3754 Pleasant Avenue South, Minneapolis MN. For tickets and information, please visit illusiontheater.org or call 612-339-4944.

Created and performed by Patrick Scully; Directed by: Michael Robins; Movement: Blake Nellis; Lighting and Video Design: Garvin Jellison; Sound Design: Jamie Lupercio; Costume Coordinator: Abigail Vaughan; Stage Manager: Virginia Culhane.



Patrick Scully

Photo by Lauren B. Photography