Aisle Fly Away

Broadway’s Byron Nease takes it on the road

April 1, 1997 By Sally Fisher

Byron Nease’s life is a one-person musical performance. The son of a third-generation Nazarene preacher, this Broadway star chronicles his story -- growing up gay in the church, coming out and living with HIV -- in *From the Parsonage to Broadway*, a musical he performs in houses of worship nationwide. Nease sees it as the crowning glory of his religious journey.

Nease comes from “a long line of religious guilt -- and confusion. I remember how thrilling it was to watch my dad captivating hundreds from his pulpit on Sundays. I idolized him and would stand on the church steps next to him when he received praise from the congregation. I envied the way he inspired people.”

Unable to reconcile the loving God of his favorite hymns and the vengeful God of his father’s fire-and-brimstone sermons, Nease immersed himself in music. He sang in school musicals and church choirs, and even went on the road singing gospel.

Longing to be “revived,” he listened to evangelists calling, “Sinner...sinner.” He feared they saw right through him. “There was something sinful and wrong in me, and I was doomed to burn in hell forever. That feeling followed me throughout my youth,” he says.

In college, Nease’s voice became full and powerful, but his soul remained uneasy. He continued to explore his musical talents and avoid his sexuality, until he studied with a teacher who one day looked him straight in the eye and told him to move to New York City, deal with his sexuality -- which seemed clear to her -- and be a leading man.

“And that’s what I did. Everything she said resonated in me. I knew that being on stage was what I really wanted and that I had to face my homosexuality. I began the process of looking at what I needed to do to feel whole.” Part of his journey included being honest with himself and those around him.

Coming out to his father was met with outrage and admonishments, tempered with love. The elder Nease saw it as his responsibility to “save” his son. Instead of responding to this proselytism as he had in his youth, Nease was inspired to redefine his relationship with his God. He began to separate what he’d been told about God from his actual experience, and he came to see himself “as a loving reflection of a loving God.” He found the strength to answer his father: “Please don’t

try to fix me, I’m not broken. God loves all the pieces of me, not just the ones Rush Limbaugh is comfortable with.”

And all the pieces were enjoying a career so successful, even Rush would be jealous. Nease had made his Broadway debut opposite Angela Lansbury in the 1983 revival of *Mame*, played the romantic lead in *Phantom of the Opera* and gone on to perform with numerous symphonies and stars on stage and screen.

It was while he was playing *Phantom*’s Raoul that Nease tested positive. He again came out to his father. Dad reverted to his fundamentalist roots and wrote to his son, expressing sadness that Byron’s life had been “devastated by making such bad choices.” Byron replied, “It’s a viral issue, not a moral issue. I am not being punished by God.”

Indeed, Nease has embraced his spiritual roots. In a way, he is following in his father’s footsteps, inspiring people with *From the Parsonage to Broadway*. The show is a fulfillment of his childhood dream: “To tell the truth in the house of a gentle, loving God.”

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