Angel and Insects

Imani Harrington says, “Pass the grasshopper skins, hold the PCP prophylaxis”

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Getting to know Imani Harrington doesn’t require homework in complementary medicine, theater or even HIV, the main characters in the drama of her life. Harrington makes it easy. In sotto voce, using an intense vocabulary of self-crafted spirituality and political insight, she vividly describes her experiences as a holistic-minded woman playwright. The 39-year-old Oakland, California, resident (profiled in POZ in February 1997), a longtime advocate for women with HIV, has won numerous awards for her “writing for social change,” as she puts it. Harrington, who’s now writing two new plays and a novel, recently divulged just how she tailors the rules of treatment and theater to suit her needs.

How is your health right now?
Tenuous. I’m still recovering from having PCP in March. That was my first hospitalization since I seroconverted in 1987. Everyone at the hospital thought I was insane because I wasn’t on Bactrim or Septra as a prophylaxis. Someone came in and talked to me about protease inhibitors and staying on Septra for the rest of my life. It was very intense. They put me on Septra and prednisone [a corticosteroid used in PCP treatment], which were so toxic I had to stop after twenty-one days. Septra is viewed as a godlike medicine, but it isn’t all that. Meds throw me off, so I can’t concentrate or think. The only way I got through taking them was that I have a very high tolerance for discomfort.

You take a holistic approach to your health. What does that include?
I meditate three times a day, which helps with concentration. And I work with three holistic practitioners. I can’t tell you how much these women have helped keep me around. I think there’s a lot of respect missing from the social landscape of people living with HIV—these women embrace me and reinforce the idea that I don’t have to feel isolated.

One of my practitioners is ChowChow Imamoto, who does Jin Shin Ho, a physical healing art that stimulates the body’s meridian points through rapid touch. It has an incredible healing power.

I also work with Brenda K. Wade, who is my spiritual teacher and advisor. She has led me on a tremendous journey of rediscovering my past. And I work with Anju Gornani, my acupuncturist. Besides the needles, she gives me my Chinese herb regimen.

What does the Chinese herb regimen entail?
I alternate immune-enhancing herbal combos every few months. I cook them down with water and take a half cup every morning and night. My last formula, which also helped with diarrhea, was distilled from the skins of grasshoppers. It's phenomenal to take an animal that has passed on and feel it coming back into a physical state in my body. It's like recycling the leftovers of the earth.

How do you feel about viral load tests and CD4 counts?
I think focusing on the numbers perpetuates anxiety. I am aware of the meanings of viral loads and CD4s, and I do get my bloodwork done on a regular basis, but it's not the whole picture. The most important thing is how I actually feel about what I am doing in my life. That's how I count my viral load. If "undetectable" meant that we had eradicated HIV, then I'd be meditating on my viral load every morning. But it doesn't.

How does your work as a playwright connect with your health?
HIV positive women are faced with so many traumatic issues, especially the association between love, sex and death. They have heavy ramifications, both socially and politically. My latest play, Do You Have Time to Die?, explores this theme through a young woman who's terminally ill and pregnant. My writing reflects the struggle of women in general, as well as my own.

Lately I've been having some problems with the theater world. It takes about nine months to get a play read, but I might not be here in nine months! When I was in the hospital, my play was being workshopped in San Francisco, and I was working on it while I was sick. It almost didn't go up, and if the director hadn't been so helpful, it would have been canceled, and then who would have seen it? Being a playwright is very hard—it takes a long time to get your foot in the door. And that's especially unfortunate for HIV positive writers.

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