Big Daddy

Michael Kearns left Hollywood, embraced fatherhood and never looked back.

February 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

In fall 1991, following actor Brad Davis' suicide—and the spotlight it shone on the movie industry's mistreatment of its members with AIDS—fellow actor Michael Kearns (of *Body Double*–fame) courageously announced to 12 million *Entertainment Tonight* viewers that he had HIV. Kearns soon grew tired of the parts he was offered after becoming known as "the HIV positive actor"—men in wheelchairs dying of AIDS. ("Having lesions applied to my face in a makeup room was a little too Twilight Zone-y," Kearns told *POZ* when he was first profiled in December 1995/January 1996.) He subsequently began working in theater where he found the entire spectrum of his experience—HIV, aging, mortality, love, loss and, now, fatherhood—all fair game. Kearns' career took off, and when *POZ* caught up with the Hollywood expat, he was doing what he does best: writing his own rules.

What are you working on right now?
Well, I got great reviews in the LA press for my most recent solo performance, *Telltale Kisses*, where I play three men at different stages of life, ages 30, 50 and 70. And now I'm writing a four-character play about the changing face of AIDS called *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee*? I'm also teaching, writing a book and being a dad.

Is HIV central to your work?
Absolutely. I haven't lost my anger, and I'm still fascinated with the issues AIDS brings up. I've found that theater welcomes these kinds of themes, whereas film and television do not. People go to the theater to get a little deeper into complex, emotional issues that they can't find in movies or on TV.

Tell me about your 4-year-old adopted daughter, Tia.
She's wonderful. She's willful, funny, bright, curious and incredibly tough—she'll have to be. Her father may be the only openly gay, openly HIV positive, over-40, single, white man in the country who has successfully adopted an African-American child. Her adoption was a major ordeal: It took two and a half years. I'm writing a book about it called *A Daddy of a Different Color*. It's about sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, ageism—all the isms that came into play during Tia's adoption.

What's your strategy for living with HIV?

I do what my doctor tells me. I try to eat right and get lots of sleep. I still write and perform, but I don't tour anymore. Not just because it's draining—I also want to spend time with my daughter. But the most important way I've fought HIV is that I was never a victim. I never made AIDS my enemy. From the first day I tested positive, I never ran away from it, I always ran toward it. And creatively, it's provided me with great material—incredible highs and lows, anger, pain, love, life and death.

How long have you been taking antiretrovirals?
Two years. Combivir [AZT and 3TC] and Fortovase [saquinavir]. I'm one of the lucky ones—they really haven't caused me any bad side effects.

What is your CD4 count?
I have no idea, and I don't care. Frankly, these questions bother me. I think people in the AIDS community have become obsessed with T-cell counts, viral loads. They sit around and talk about it for hours: which drugs they're taking, comparing their blood test reports. There's even a weird competition about it. I think it's stupid. It misses the whole point of being healthy.

Do you think about death?
That's a good question. The only time it really bothers me is when I think about Tia. I could say goodbye to my work, I could say goodbye to my friends, but the thought of saying goodbye to this child is really more than I can bear. It's more than I can comprehend, because I've never loved anybody the way I love her. It's difficult to even talk about.

Does she know you have HIV?
No, she's too young. She knows Daddy takes lots of pills, and Daddy has to see the doctor, but I'm waiting until she's old enough to understand before I tell her. She knows I have a boyfriend, though.

Oh, is this new?
As a matter of fact, it is. I've been very careful about how and when to introduce him to Tia, because I want things to be as stable as possible for her. She's very possessive of me. The other day I told her he might be spending the night sometime soon and when he did, he'd be staying with me in my bed. I asked her, "Is that OK with you?" And she thought about it and said, "As long as you both keep your clothes on."

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