Blade Runner

Brian Wright breaks the ice

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Sleepless in Seattle: “I’m looking for a boyfriend, damn it.”

Is Brian Wright the Bill T. Jones of figure skating? The world-renowned figure-skating choreographer’s health struggles may have brought “a certain intensity to my work,” he says, “a darkness -- but I do not choreograph pieces about HIV.” And when Wright hears that his most recent work -- a program for the up-and-coming skater Michael Weiss that’s been winning awards and stunning audiences -- is interpreted as “AIDS art,” he laughs. “It’s about the first time I recognized who I was,” he says. “I looked in a mirror and thought, ’I’m an ugly kid.’ ” But audiences who know he’s gay and HIV positive are increasingly seeing AIDS metaphors in his work when none is intended. “That piece is about all the work that went into creating my gregarious and loud facade, and the reality of who I was behind that facade.”

Having recognized who he was at about age 8, Wright recalls his desire to be a ballet dancer. “My father said no -- not because he didn’t want any son of his to be a dancer, but because I was the last of four kids who had already been through French horn, piano and trumpet lessons. He thought my interest in dance would pass.” But it didn’t.

Three years later, watching the 1968 Winter Olympics in Grenoble, Wright decided that if he couldn’t dance, he would skate. He found a coupon for 10 free skating lessons in a newspaper and went to the rink. “The day I walked on the ice, it was instantly home,” he says.

Three decades later, the ugly-duckling-turned-six-foot-two adult with Richie Cunningham good looks and dark green eyes became an award-winning figure-skating choreographer. His client list of national champions and Olympic medalists includes Christopher Bowman, Scott Davis, Kristie Yamaguchi, and Rosalind Sumners. Wright also did a tenure as the artistic director for the World Skating Academy -- an Olympic training center in Indianapolis -- and has directed and choreographed for the Ice Capades. This year ABC, NBC and ESPN have profiled Wright, and PBS is preparing a documentary about his work “and what it’s like to be openly gay and HIV positive in the world of professional figure skating.”

He first learned he was HIV positive during what Wright jokingly says was a “beautiful time in my life. A time of denial and ignorance.” Touring with an ice-show in Canada throughout the early ’80s, Wright didn’t hear much about this disease. "News of the ’gay cancer’ somehow didn’t make

it into the *Toronto Gazette*.“ By 1984, aware of AIDS, he’d radically changed his sexual behavior, limiting himself to mutual masturbation and ”a lot of nurturing."

In 1986, assuming he was negative, Wright donated blood for a study comparing the blood of HIV negative men to that of HIV positive men. “I can remember being told I was positive, and still not feeling at risk,” he says, shaking his head. “I was even a little relieved: ’Whew, I don’t have it. I’m only positive.’ This was when they weren’t sure if all people with HIV would come down with AIDS.”

Last year, however, Wright had a close call, he landed in the hospital with internal bleeding. “They didn’t know what was going on,” Wright says. It turns out that he has a condition that causes his blood “to thicken like molasses one minute and turn into water the next.” To control it he injects Coumadin and Heparin.

After his recovery, Wright quit his job in Indianapolis and moved back to his hometown of Seattle to be close to friends and family. “Now,” he says, “my priorities are finally in order. Quality of life comes first. I have sacrificed a lot to skating, and now I have to make time for myself.” One of Wright’s new priorities is his love life. “I’m looking for a boyfriend, damn it,” he laughs. “It’s been a long time since I had one, but I was processing a lot. Now I’m ready.”

Bill T. Jones on ice? Maybe not, but one can surely understand the comparison. Wright himself may deny any conscious intent to place AIDS metaphors in his choreography, but even he says, “it’s had a huge impact on the flavor of my work.” After all, “you can’t choreograph from a hospital bed.”

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