

Dancing Around It

When AIDS-themed dance is a dress rehearsal for life

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“I sort of felt that as long as I didn’t take the test it didn’t have to be real.” Mark Dendy is twirling a white-wrapped straw in his fingers, as though it were a cigarette. His dirty blond hair has been recently sheared from long curly locks to the buzz he now sports, but even at this length the curls are straining for control of his features. “But I knew. In 1988, I had a lover die from AIDS and I knew that I had often had unprotected anally receptive sex with him, and so I knew. But as long as I didn’t take the test it didn’t have to be real.”

It is hard to imagine that this mild-mannered, soft-spoken, slight man is the controversial choreographer/director whose innovative dance/theater pieces leave audiences spellbound. Then, as he speaks, as he tells of his choices in life and health care, the imagination comes into focus.

At 33, Dendy has received three NEA grants. His work is some of the most promising the dance world has seen in recent years, yet Dendy remains obscured from the mainstream. “I work in a lot of disciplines,” explains Dendy. “The modern dance world and the ballet world have been very separate. They were sort of married in the ’70s, and the marriage is starting to be consummated, but they remain at odds stylistically. They are different camps with different artists. I am fortunate enough to work in both arenas. And then theater is a different world still. It’s like I am maintaining several different careers.”

This year Dendy has been in high demand. He spent the spring in Hartford, Connecticut, where he choreographed Tony Kushner’s *The Dybbuk*, returning to New York long enough to stage a new dance piece and premiere a new one-act play. Then he jetted to Paris to revive his Classic Stage Company turn as Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. This summer he was one of the artists in residence at the American Dance Festival, before running off to Seattle to stage a new production of *Cinderella* for the Pacific Northwest Ballet.

His one-person show (for which he ditches dance) *Busride To Heaven* has received acclaim from coast to coast. In *Busride*, Dendy brings us four very different characters with one thing in common: Very recent death. They are each filling out questionnaires about the lives they just led while awaiting a cloud to take them on to their final destinations. *Busride* hit the road this fall with tour dates in Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison and Miami.

An earlier work, *Back Beat*, takes a hard, fast look at AIDS and the anger associated with the loss it

brings. "I did it first in 1991, and it was actually about me. It's really funny because it was the one place where my denial didn't hold. If it did, it's only in that I directed the piece, so someone else was up there being me. Also, the character went to a doctor. I didn't do that. For me, *Back Beat* was a way to do the things that I was supposed to do, to have them be real, without them having to be real. What is really funny is that most of the dance world, and even most of the company, thought that I was coming out, that this was my story and that it was all real. I didn't actually test until three years later and I still don't have a doctor."

Avoiding doctors is a conscious choice for Dendy. "I don't want anyone arguing with me about my protocol. I don't trust Western medicine. I am taking a holistic approach. I read a lot and I know a lot. I do a lot of meditation. I think that is very important, hooking into that universal power, that thing in the universe which is healing my body. I exercise. And another really important part of my protocol is not what I take, but what I don't take. No alcohol. No recreational drugs. No sugar. No caffeine. No city water -- always seltzer for me."

But it's not always no. "I have to admit I can still be a closet smoker, like after sex or something. I'm a Jackie O smoker. I never do it in public." And addressing AIDS publicly is no longer a substitute for fully dealing with it privately. "I have other moments. Like I had a steak *au poivre* in Paris which, even though I had diarrhea for two days, was totally worth it." Putting it on stage couldn't make that any more real.