Let’s Dance

Who says AIDS can’t make you kick up your heels? Two HIV-positive choreographers perform bold new work about the risks and rewards of coming out.

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Chris Ramos

He’s dancing as fast as he can from doc’s office to dating game.

Whether Prokofiev or hip-hop, music has always inspired movement for Chris DC Ramos. But an uncanny quiet was the motivation for the choreographer’s latest work, Silent/Listen, a dance about the hush surrounding AIDS.

Ramos, 35, grew up in Manila and Hawaii in a huge family that included a tango-dancing father and an older brother who’d caught disco fever. Ramos chose professional ballet instead, eventually migrating to New York City in 1989 to perform with modern-dance companies such as Nicholas Rodriguez & DanceCompass and to create his own work, a hybrid of ballet and modern.

When Ramos tested positive for HIV in 1996, he says, “my reaction was blank. There was a numbness.” And then, he adds simply, “I moved on.” He formed his own company, Ramos Dance, a year later. HIV, he says, “pushed me to create.”

Around that time, Ramos’ mentor, a dance teacher at the University of Hawaii, died of AIDS; the news was whispered to him by the man’s grieving widow. The tight secrecy around this death stayed with Ramos, making him realize “how difficult it is to disclose such a thing, even to someone you are close to.” And it planted the seeds for Silent/Listen.

As the piece germinated, the asymptomatic Ramos, who’s been in a committed relationship for 10 years, noticed another disturbing silence -- that of his HIV-positive friends as they struggled to make their way back into the dating scene after recovering from years of illness. “I could sense that they were having problems,” he says. “But they would avoid the topic.”

The dance, he says, is not only about “the uncertainty of what is going to happen on a date, including when to reveal your HIV status,” but is also “a commentary on the uncertainty of being healthy.” Ramos, whose compact body covers space onstage with the speed of an athlete, tackles the issues in both serious and hysterically funny ways in Silent/Listen.

“The whole piece never mentions the term HIV,” says Ramos, who sought to echo contemporary

conversations about AIDS. “It’s OK to hear positive,” he says, “but it’s not as blatant, as direct, as HIV.”

At the New York premiere of Silent/Listen at The Danspace Project in October, the audience occasionally erupts into laughter as Ramos whirls through quicksilver costume changes and explosive dance phrases. The first scene shows him as a patient in the office of his doctor, who, by means of a taped voiceover, prescribes new meds and congratulates him on his stable health. The piece segues into a sinuous dance, to the accompaniment of a fluttery-voiced soprano, who sings the “Habañera” from Bizet’s opera Carmen, substituting the names of antiretrovirals for the original French lyrics of the song’s grand opening lines: “Ep-i-vir…A-Z-T…3-T-C…ne-vir-a-pine…”

After passing through a bar scene, in which Ramos, via voiceover, negotiates disclosure and sex with an HIV-negative pickup, the work ends with a lyrical solo. We don’t see Ramos himself, but just his shadow behind a lit screen, dancing to the music from Saint-Saen’s The Dying Swan. In the final image, Ramos forms a cross -- a plus sign -- with his hands.

It is a daring declaration for Ramos, who has not yet disclosed his HIV status to his own family. Breaking the silence in public, he says, “is one way for me to have relief, to send the message.” I ask how he imagines his family would react to the piece. With a nervous laugh, he says, “It would be very dramatic for them.”

Fay Simpson
The mother-and-child reunion is only a disclosure away

Hoping to stave off the stigma her daughter might have to face, Fay Simpson waited several years to tell Ella, now 11, that her mother has HIV. In her new solo work, Trapped in Seven, Simpson uses dance, music and spoken word to trace her struggles with HIV and abuse, and to reenact the raw moments when she finally told Ella the truth. The highly intuitive girl, Simpson says, “felt unconscious fear” about losing her mother long before being told.

As a downtown Manhattan performer in the mid-’80s, the Judy Davis look-alike was a self-described “granola girl” -- into holistic health, known for her boundless energy, dancing with small postmodern dance troupes and living with her husband and baby on a Hudson River houseboat. In 1987, she had a one-night stand with a gay dance partner and a few weeks later came down with what seemed like a terrible flu. When she went for an HIV test a few months later, the news was bad. “I got very, very quiet,” she says. “Instead of panic, it felt like slow motion. It felt surreal.”

Her friends fell into two camps: those who offered spiritual and practical support and, as Simpson, now 42, recalls with a laugh, “those who said, ’I’m going to go buy my funeral clothes and be by your side to the end.’” For Simpson, who was sexually abused at age 7 and experienced violent relationships with men as an adult, testing positive was a turning point, a chance to cast off victimhood. She took the road less traveled, refusing antiretrovirals and getting a good shrink to go with her herbalist and acupuncturist. That same year she formed her own company, Fay Simpson Dance Theatre. In Trapped in Seven, which premiered at New York City’s Home theater in

January, Simpson contrasts her own triumph over fear with the secret apprehensions of Ella, who is HIV negative.

“Her life is so important to me that it kept me from diving into a woe-is-me scenario,” Simpson says. “Whatever it took, I could not die. I wanted her to have a healthy, normal childhood.” Simpson’s commitment to her daughter proved a positive force in her own life. “I find myself not falling into as many traps,” she says of her relations with men. However, post-infection couplings have been anything but smooth. Simpson and her husband parted ways (still a tough subject for Simpson), and she’s been through a rogue’s gallery of dates in the years since.

One man craved raucous safe-sex dates with her, but little else. “I asked, ’Can we see each other more often?’” Simpson recalls. He looked at her in disbelief and said, “I can’t have a relationship with you. You have no future.” The guy, a doctor, died six months later of a heart attack.

Three years ago, Simpson started a protease cocktail -- her first antiretrovirals -- which raised her CD4 cells from 4 to over 500. Now that her daughter is privy to her HIV status, Simpson has begun to lead workshops for people with life-challenging diseases. Offered in conjunction with her performances, the workshops use yoga, breathing exercises and the body’s seven chakras (energy centers) to help others “find that which is negative in them and get it out of the body,” she says.

“When you’re a survivor, you feel very indebted, very grateful, for your life,” Simpson says. “Most things I pursue are about giving back -- workshops with HIV-positive kids, the homeless. I feel like I need to be of service.”

But, as she dramatized in Trapped in Seven, none of this could happen until Ella knew the truth. “Once I told her, I felt OK,” Simpson says. “Then I could come out about this.”

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