Marquee Values

The theater community cares for its own, but Broadway doesn't care for AIDS

October 1, 1995 By Ann Northrop

There's just one real Broadway horror story that everyone repeats, and even *that* has conflicting versions and interpretations. But here it is. In November 1989, *Grand Hotel* opened on Broadway. It was directed by Tony-winner Tommy Tune, and the leading man was David Carroll. What no one knew at the time was that Carroll had AIDS.

Some time after the opening, Carroll got sick and was hospitalized, leaving the show temporarily. Then he got better. He went back to work. Except now everyone knew, and a rumor quickly spread that the leading lady at the time, Rene Ceballos, suddenly didn't want to kiss him.

When word of this got to Broadway Cares' Rodger McFarlane, he called producer Martin Richards to demand action. The cast was talked to. Word was also passed indirectly to Ceballos that she needn't be fearful. The show went on.

But Carroll got sick again. Here the stories diverge. One casting director says she heard people in charge went to his hospital bed and asked him to leave the show. Other theater journalists, actors, dancers, playwrights have all heard the tale that Carroll was forced out and thereby deprived of insurance coverage, while his director, Tune, looked the other way.

Yet there are those who say no, that's not true and not fair. First of all, Carroll was not great at handling the situation and probably took himself out, and, at any rate, didn't know how to handle his illness forthrightly. Second, Carroll, after leaving the show, was asked to be a part of the cast album, attended the recording session and was singled out for tribute in the liner notes. And Tommy Tune has raised a lot of money to fight AIDS.

Take your pick.

While this remains the only major anecdote discussed publicly, it is emblematic of the current climate in the theater community surrounding HIV. Both good and bad are still happening. You can find terror, compassion, pride, sorrow, beauty, love and hatred -- just like in the real world.

AIDS experts generally divide AIDS issues into three categories: Prevention of new infections, research for treatments and a cure, and care for people who need help. The theater community has clearly decided to concentrate its efforts almost exclusively in the third area, taking care of

those in its own family who are sick. Their commitment to care could serve as a model for every other community.

The stories of true compassion pile up: Actors kept on contract for months and months until their deaths, although they were unable to work; the heroic sacrifices put into endless fundraising; the basic decency of producers to their employees; an actor on a road tour kept supplied with pentamidine and medical referrals; lack of gossip about who has it; AIDS Walk materials posted on callboards backstage; truly caring and comprehensive assistance available from the Actors' Fund. The references are endless. Everyone, universally, believes that the theater community -- on and off Broadway, and in regional theaters and touring shows -- has done a Herculean and deeply sincere job of taking responsibility for the care of each other in the midst of an historic crisis.

In 1987, Colleen Dewhurst, the late, great actress, was the president of Actors' Equity, the union, and head of the Actors' Fund's Human Services Committee. When the impact of the AIDS epidemic began to dawn on the theater community, Colleen "just defied everybody to do anything but behave," says Rodger McFarlane, former executive director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS (BC/EFA).

Equity set up Equity Fights AIDS to raise money for the care of its members. The establishment producers started Broadway Cares separately but almost simultaneously. By 1988, McFarlane was running Broadway Cares and Tom Viola was in charge of EFA. They decided to transcend some early territorial infighting and collaborate, joining each other's boards and setting up an informal alliance.

In 1992, Broadway Cares and Equity Fights AIDS formally merged, although it was mostly a formality at that point. McFarlane was executive director until his resignation last year. Viola continues as producing director at BC/EFA, putting on the big shows.

Besides the annual extravaganzas (Gypsy of the Year, Broadway Bares, the Easter Bonnet competition), BC/EFA does most of its fundraising -- on Broadway and in touring and regional companies -- with an official Thanksgiving Week devoted to audience appeals at performances. Each show can do whatever it wants, which everyone finds to be a truer grassroots system than imposing a rigid format. Some sell special souvenirs; some ask for contributions on the way out; some hold bake sales; some casts contribute instead of giving opening night gifts to each other; some dedicate the proceeds of special performances.

The lion's share of money raised by BC/EFA goes to the Actors' Fund, a community-based organization which for over 100 years has provided "for the social welfare of all entertainment professionals" [see "Taking Care of Their Own "]. BC/EFA has contributed more than $7.3 million to the Fund since 1987 and has promised to raise another $2.3 million in 1995. But BC/EFA also distributes millions directly to hundreds of other AIDS service organizations around the country for care and advocacy. Producing director Tom Viola says $540,000 has just been allocated to 187 service and advocacy organizations by a grants committee that includes more and more representatives of service organizations and people with AIDS. Most money goes directly to

individual care. Two needle-exchange programs will get $2,500 each. And the Treatment Action Group gets $7,500. A few grants have been criticized by some as being too political, but the vast consensus is nothing but praise for BC/EFA.

One dissenting voice was an op-ed newspaper piece by a theatergoer who complained about cast members at *Cats* asking for contributions. Michele Cardella objected to feeling emotionally blackmailed to spend $20 for a signed poster or shatter the dreams of her daughter, who couldn't get a free autograph. "If Broadway really cares," harrumphed Cardella, "it should fight AIDS by donating a portion of the $195 I dropped at the box office. Throwing money at theater ushers and over-made-up actors are acts of compliance, not charity."

Actually, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* did give one dollar from every ticket sale to BC/EFA for its first year of performances. "The producers offered it as part of their bid to get the play," reports author Tony Kushner. But the play started piling up losses and the investors got itchy so the contribution stopped four or five months before the show closed. Net total raised: About $250,000 over the year it was happening. Everybody's happy. Everybody thinks it was a great thing to do in the first place. Nobody's mad at the investors for stopping the deal. "After all," says Tom Viola, "they were losing money. And that $250,000 was great for us."

But while the money-raising and caretaking are very, very real and important, they are not the whole story. There is more to this picture. There is fear. And there is loathing. And the list of rumored bad stories is as long as the list of good ones: The musical director with AIDS forced out just before the big opening; the actor whose contract wasn't renewed; the discussions of stopping the audience appeals for money; the producers who have always refused to do those appeals; the hairdresser whose obvious illness is ignored; the presentation of a special Tony award to BC/EFA in 1993 -- off-camera.

"It's a terror," says actor/writer/agent Dick Scanlan, who is living with AIDS [see "Checking In"]. "AIDS is whispered about, and those who have it are seen as the bad luck people, as opposed to the chosen ones who don't. The people who run the theater are terribly homophobic, and this dynamic has been transferred to AIDS.

"You know, the theater world is very myopic," he continues. "It's basically run by a dozen guys who are 70 years old, and Rocco Landesman. They have lent their commitment to the cause, but many of them just don't get it. It's a peculiar world."

Marc Oka, 32, assistant choreographer for *Miss Saigon* and HIV positive, has seen the community's response evolve. "In the mid-'80s I was in a production of *Cats* in Los Angeles when one of our company members died. They posted a note announcing it at half-hour [just before the show]. It was devastating. When the show went on tour from there, there was another death, and this time they told us at rehearsal. That was a little better. Now I see people here in *Miss Saigon* openly kept on contract when they can't work."

"I'm secure," says Oka, "but I still have some fear. What's going to happen to me after this show? Will others be afraid to hire me? I think it's important for me, as someone with HIV, to come out

and talk. I don't want to live in fear. I want to live today. I want people to know it's possible to live and work. And I want to be available if other people with HIV want to talk to me."

Maybe the most telling fact about Broadway and fear is the following: Never, ever at any of the BC/EFA fundraising extravaganzas has anyone on the stage identified him- or herself as having HIV or AIDS. Tom Viola reports the only vehicle of theirs which includes names and pictures of people living with HIV or AIDS is a pamphlet advertising the availability of social services.

"The majority of theater people with HIV or AIDS are out to a few people at work," says Viola, "but not out to the larger public. It also depends on where they're at in their career. And, of course, it's much harder for a romantic leading man to be out."

Playwright and actor David Drake, who is HIV negative, is disgusted with the "falseness of the theater community. It prevents confrontation with the real issues." He's not surprised at fear of disclosure.

"The fundraisers have a giddy, crazy quality," explains Drake. "They're never specific about AIDS. Usually they can't even say the word. There's never a PWA on stage. They don't do anything radical. They're into denial, and now they're into a grief situation. At *Love! Valour! Compassion!* there's an audience full of gay, white men screaming with laughter, sobbing at sentimentality; it's hyper-grief, over the top. You can see it in their bodies; they're time bombs of grief, but they're not really dealing with it."

Drake is also upset with what he sees as Broadway's attitude of wishful thinking. "They want it to be over, so they act like it's ending. They wish it away. They're not dealing with the fact that more young people will get it, and they're romanticizing suicide, which appears much more on stage than it does in real life."

Pulitzer- and Tony-winning author of *Angels in America* Tony Kushner agrees to some extent. While impressed by producers' sincere commitment to his plays, he is clear that they would never have made it to Broadway, with their stunningly strong AIDS and gay themes, if they had not been tremendous hits in London and Los Angeles or praised to the skies by then-most-feared-critic Frank Rich of *The New York Times.*

Kushner is also "disappointed. I had hoped that awareness would lead to political radicalization. But the anger is missing. The whole arts community is pathetically passive. You can see it in the debate over funding the NEA."

In fact, this year the community gave a special Tony to the National Endowment for the Arts but, like BC/EFA in 1993, the NEA got its Tony off-camera.

Marvin Shulman, who worked for the late Michael Bennett and who was also the treasurer of ACT UP [see "The Sum of Its Parts"], is appalled. "You'd never know the theater community has been devastated by AIDS. There's no publicity about it. Even the *Variety* obits don't highlight it."

“Broadway is a superb employer, exemplary from day one,” insists Rodger McFarlane, “but people are still not out, either about being gay or about having HIV. The problem is that producers abdicate responsibility and underestimate their audiences. They’re deadly serious about raising money, but they are still not dealing with helping people be out in the theater.”

Viola concurs, and cites what he calls the generation gap in the industry. Again, the experience is mixed. Some producers are great; some aren’t. But to the extent they aren’t, it’s attributed to the usual two major reasons: Ignorance and fear. Many of those in charge really still don’t get that it’s OK to be gay and OK to have HIV or AIDS, and they have constructed a world of fantasy and escape which they feel will be threatened by any intersection with reality.

Jerry Mitchell, who produces the annual striptease fundraiser Broadway Bares for BC/EFA, is on a deliberate campaign to make issues of sexuality more explicit. “We’re totally positive about sexuality in this show. We support safer sex and we distribute condoms. And we’ve been very successful. Our first show, in 1992, raised about $8,000. The 1995 show raised $86,000. I always knew sex sells, but I’m sort of amazed at how quickly we’ve grown. We could take this show on the road and do a lot of education.”

Viola says, “The confusion caused by not being honest is debilitating. Those of us who are HIV positive have to stand up for who we are and tell the fucking truth, so we can then confront people in power.”

Some do. Playwright Fred Gormley, who is HIV positive and helps out doing computer work at the Actors’ Fund offices, finds producers uncomfortable with him. They don’t like him asking them to read his plays quickly because he has HIV. He finds them to be mostly straight white guys whose main priority is money. But he also has trouble with small gay theaters. “Why the dark stuff?” they ask him.

Gormley is also amazed at the denial. “I live in a war zone, totally different from everyone else’s city, and I don’t see my world represented anywhere.”

Dick Scanlan has an explanation: “People who are in the theater have matured in very peculiar ways. Their knowledge of the world is limited. The show comes first, not people.”

The social workers at the Actors’ Fund AIDS Initiative see the complex repercussions of all this. They hear lots of stories of people being well taken care of, but they also hear the rumors of discrimination. And they see the fear.

“For performers, it’s not just about illness; it’s about the loss of a dream. Their identity is tied up in their work and they won’t stop working when they get sick. It’s not just economic issues. They don’t want to give up the dream.”

I sat down with four members of the social work team to listen to their experience of the epidemic.

“Most people are scared to come in here. And then when they do, they break into tears when they

hear what's available. There is a lot of fear and a lot of denial. And there is anger at the lack of treatments. Actors who are still working won't come to support groups or on trips. But there are some skills that actors have that come in handy. First, their body awareness gives them strength and resiliency; they're used to handling the terror of rejection and isolation so they're tough; and they have great makeup expertise, perfect for covering KS lesions. But dealing with AIDS brings a lot of new people into their lives, which can be daunting. We sat down and looked at a typical client and found he had had to deal with 14 different offices and organizations and systems around his disease. Fourteen!"

Fear can also be overblown. *Village Voice* AIDS reporter (and *POZ* contributor) Mark Schoofs tells the story of his good friend, the late playwright Scott McPherson. "Scott was terrified to come out about having AIDS," says Schoofs. "He was afraid of losing his health insurance. But when he finally did come out, nothing happened. It was fine. And I can still see him and his lover, both very sick, at opening night of his play *Marvin's Room*, weeping with joy over Frank Rich's rave review."

Nonetheless, fear remains. Bill Nolte is an actor living with AIDS. "I'm not totally out. Not everyone knows. But it does come up sometimes in the dressing room. And being out there allows me to help others. I wish there had been someone I could talk to when I tested positive in l989. I thought at first I'd be dead in a year.

"The reactions I get from people when I do tell them run the gamut from full compassion to silence. Some become closer and we form new bonds. One good friend was speechless and I haven't spoken to him since. I suspect producers I've worked for must suspect. I'm currently in the Abbott protease inhibitor trial, and that and other treatments often mean a lot of travel. Once I had to travel four hours for a trial, get back to rehearsal, and then get back to the trial site. It's very rigorous and difficult. And now I'm finding the casts of shows asked to fill out informational medical forms so the company management can be aware of potential problems. They ask about allergies, blood types and whether you have a 'life-threatening illness.' Is this a direct result of AIDS? If I answer yes, which I don't, am I going to be fired? Some people are afraid to go to the Actors' Fund for help because their agents and casting directors are in the same building."

So does Broadway care? Of course it does. And it doesn't. Excellent services are available. The fundraising is superb. Many people are taken care of in extraordinary ways. But it's still difficult to be out. There are still no major stars -- actors, directors, writers, producers -- who are publicly HIV positive when they're alive, or even publicly gay, for that matter. Top-flight composer Jerry Herman was supposed to be the coverboy for this issue of *POZ*, but backed out at the last minute pleading no time for the interview because of experimental treatments and their side effects. But he did find time to tell *The Washington Post* Sunday Arts section he's got HIV.

What are we left with? Lots of care, no political anger, no prevention education for chorus boys. And in some places, a growing sense of resignation.

And Greg Louganis, strangely enough, has emerged as the new HIV positive poster boy for the theater, taking over Dan Butler's autobiographical Off-Broadway play, *The Only Thing Worse You*

Could Have Told Me... It will be very interesting to see what impact, if any, that has on the theater community.

Meanwhile, of course, the show must go on.
