My Brother, My Self

Choreographer Neil Greenberg touches nerve with AIDS work

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If one is to judge by the packed houses and the decibel level of the standing ovation *Not About AIDS Dance* receives whenever it's performed, choreographer Neil Greenberg has touched a nerve in the dance-going public. At its premier last year, *The New York Times* hailed *Not About AIDS Dance* as "an important and very beautiful work about the experience of living in the age of AIDS… a profoundly truthful masterwork."

The *Village Voice* echoed the praise, referring to Greenberg's astringency, his absolute refusal to fall victim to grief, self-pity or polemics—an attitude, according to the paper's critic, that broadened the scope of the dance and added to its impact.

The dance press has long recognized Greenberg's talents. Ballet Review, Dance Magazine and Dance Ink were each early champions. This year, as if to commemorate his status as the emerging important voice in the world of postmodern modern dance, New York City's preeminent downtown performance space, The Kitchen, named Greenberg curator of dance events.

Success, however, hasn't turned him all soft, which is no surprise because the news in Not About AIDS Dance is not only that it's a sensation. What's also remarkable is that Greenberg comes out in it—not from the closet but from the pathology lab. Twenty minutes or so into the action, during one of its most moving passages, in which Greenberg depicts an image of approaching death, the following lines of text among several others that are flashed on the back wall during the performance give us a look at the choreographer's medical chart:

"This is what my brother Jon looked like in his coma. "He was in a coma two days before he died of AIDS "I'm HIV+…"

Of course, being HIV positive and being frank about it doesn't raise too many eyebrows today. But for Greenberg the revelation is momentous.

"Usually my work ahs some self-reference in it, but it's usually a reference to the dance," he says. "This time I wanted to make it more personal, to have the reference be about the dancers on the stage. "I saw it as a postmodern *A Chorus Line*. That was my motivation for saying I was HIV positive. In a way, I needed to do it, to tell myself so that I would know it, very clearly, very openly,

so that I would understand that it's not something to keep secret."

There's a directness in Greenberg's manner, a lack of guile that's surprising in a performer. But the measured way he stalks a room clearly marks him as a dancer. Dancing is what he always wanted to do, and as a young boy he started studying tap and ballet outside St. Paul, Minnesota, where he was raised. When he was 17 he came to New York City "to study at Julliard and to be gay."

Not long after arriving, he landed a job with the Eliot Feld Company and then danced with Merce Cunningham's troupe for more than six years. His own pieces reflect his association with the great modern dance master. They're formal, abstract and communicate primarily through the dance values that interest Greenberg most: Time and space and energy.

Telling an audience outright about his private life was a clear departure.

"There's that paradox about being HIV positive, which is that being HIV positive can ultimately turn out to be a positive experience. Many people feel they learn things and are able to cut through some bullshit because of it. People talk about having spiritual insights and I certainly understand that. My brother Jon talked about those things happening to him."

"But I have to say I think getting something positive about being HIV positive is a process that everybody has to go through in their own way. Certainly what I found through the process of making a piece of art is that such a process can't be particularly goal-oriented. It has to be process-oriented, and when I tried to get to that positive place consciously, I started denying all sorts of things."

Still, Greenberg says the threw himself into making the dance, "not to convince anyone of anything but to hold onto my sanity."

Something else was also driving him, another impulse tied-in to his HIV status but different from it: The death from AIDS of his brother Jon.

Jon was three years older than Neil. "We were both little gay boys in Minnesota watching *The Wizard of Oz* on TV and listening to Judy Garland," Greenberg says. He recalls that in New York City Jon flailed around a bit, but eventually he "did a lot of work with ACT UP. He was part of the Mary's, one of ACT UP's affinity groups, and was one of the people who stormed the *MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour* television studio.

Before [Jon's] death he talked about his funeral and said, 'I want you to burn me in the street and eat my flesh.' When he died his coffin was carried from the subway stop at First Avenue and First Street right near his house to Tompkins Square Park where he was eulogized. People spoke and John Kelly sang.

"My need to make this dance was also my need to find some context for death and my brother's

death and my death—which is what I saw in his death. He died July 12, 1993, and it was a huge experience for me to have to watch him die. To be there with someone who looks like me a little and who is dying of this disease. I have other siblings who I love as much as I love Jon but I can't think of another death that could affect me the way this death has. It was like my own mortality rushing in on me."

What's more, as if to grotesquely accentuate that sense of mortality, while Greenberg was working on *Not About AIDS Dance* six close friends died during a two-month period.

"I've been in what is this unfortunately, really unfortunately, typical experience for a gay man of a certain age, which is to experience a cluster of deaths of friends from AIDS," Greenberg says. "Friends who were in the full bloom of life. Not everyone has one of those people be a brother, but I think that Jon's death helped me to understand the experience more. It helped me not to deny it."

Now Greenberg says he sees that "as an artist, one of the ways I have of working out my problems of surviving is to make art, it's like a survival tool."

"The rhythms I came up with, the spatial arrangements that took shape seem to reflect my experience. I can point to certain things in the dance now and see how they deaccumulate. They're about loss. Instead of structures accumulating, they'd disintegrate over and over. That seems to be the pattern I came up with quite unconsciously. So the process was beneficial. It helped me heal. Now that's a buzz word, but it did it. Healing is something art can do."

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Neil-Greenberg-HIV-20782-7528