POZ Work

January 1, 2000 By Dick Scanlan

Fifteen years ago, to commemorate our first Valentine's Day, Kees Chapman gave me a card that boasted a big heart built from thousands of bricks. Standing atop the heart's arch, like a construction worker on the roof of a 20-story building, was a tiny man preparing to lay the last brick in place. The back of the card revealed the painting's title: "One's Heart in One's Work."

Though the image was striking, it hardly seemed to fit Kees or me. He produced all-male, X-rated movies, and while he enjoyed the income, Kees was deeply conflicted about the legitimacy of his profession. I was a struggling actor, juggling catering, word processing and the occasional appearance on *Another World*. We invested our hearts in each other, but neither of us knew how to pour our hearts into our professional lives.

Kees never learned. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1987, he died a year later, one semester shy of a law degree. In a deathbed coma, he muttered, "If only I hadn't been so bad," over and over, and I took that as a haunting sign that he died with unresolved ambivalence about (among other issues) his porn past.

Confronted with the implication Kees' death carried regarding my health, I determined to figure out my future, even if that meant changing careers. Kees had long suggested that I try writing, sometimes even offering to pay for classes. During our years together, I interpreted that encouragement as a subtle hint about my acting abilities—"Why don't you try writing, kid?"—but, in the wake of his death, I decided to trust his intuition.

My first idea, conceived weeks after Kees' death, was to adapt the movie *Thoroughly Modern Millie* as a Broadway musical. *Millie*, a moderately successful 1967 film, tells the story of a farm girl who moves to 1922 Manhattan to reinvent herself as a flapper. The Roaring '20s bore a striking resemblance to the Roaring '70s as I experienced them, and I wanted to celebrate all the joy that the epidemic had wiped away.

Of course, no producer would hire me for such an enormous task with zero writing credits under my belt, so I turned my attention to short stories and magazine articles. Eventually, my byline appeared regularly in many magazines, my fiction was collected in a book, and I was ready to tackle *Millie*. This was 1993, and I convinced Richard Morris, the author of the movie and holder of the rights, to collaborate with me on the script. Unfortunately, my health was in decline, as was

Richard's: He was diagnosed with cancer shortly after we met. As our script started to unfold, our respective bodies continued to fall apart.

With my CD4 cells down to a harrowing 37, I traveled to Richard's LA home in 1995 to rework our first draft. It seemed unlikely that either of us would live long enough to see the musical produced, but we continued our daily sessions. Sometimes we'd work in his glassed-in dining room, other times we'd sit side by side in the local emergency room, but we always had scripts in one hand and red pencils in the other. Richard's friends often remarked that *Millie* was keeping him alive. She did the same for me: Even if my life was ending, Millie's loomed ahead of her, and her determination to remake herself into the person she wanted to be was a quality I hoped to be remembered for. Besides, the joy of working on a project that demanded every bit of talent and know-how I'd accumulated to date kept fatigue away more effectively than acupuncture, Ensure and testosterone injections rolled into one.

By the time I returned home, we'd overhauled the script, and my immune system had started to rebound, thanks to an AZT/3TC combination. Richard was less fortunate. The next time I went to LA, we didn't write a word. Instead, I sat by his hospital bed. Though morphine successfully eradicated Richard's pain, it pitched him into an agitated state, a sort of doped anxiety. Two days before his death, he became distraught, desperate to tell me something, but unable to formulate words. Finally he blurted it out: "We have to finish the last scene!" "We have," I told him. "So I don't have to write anything else?" he asked. "We're finished," I said, "and you've done amazing work."

Those were the last words we exchanged, but this past October, a reading of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was staged in New York City, and Richard's voice was heard again, making 200 of theater's top players (not altogether friendly folk—think *All About Eve*) laugh and cheer. I was obviously filled with pride as I watched *Millie* take a major step toward Broadway. But mostly I was overwhelmed with love for both Richard and Kees: They may not be there to take a bow on opening night, but they'll be present in every laugh, every lyric, every line of the show.

Meanwhile, that Valentine's Day card holds a framed place of honor on my wall. It elicits neither grief nor longing from me, but rather undying gratitude for the gift that Kees gave me when he encouraged me to pursue the profession that's buoyed me along my journey to and from death's door. For all I know, that tiny man standing atop the heart might have HIV; it's amazing what a seriously ill person can accomplish when day by day, brick by brick, he puts his heart in his work.

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