Pas de Deux

Dancer Arturo Fernandez lives step by step with HIV

December 1, 1995 By John Servillo

He likes to keep himself busy, teaching dance at San Francisco State University and the San Francisco Dance Center, home of Lines Contemporary Ballet. He runs his own Left Coast Company and has toured the country and the world, including Southeast Asia, Australia and the Soviet Union, since 1974. Arturo Fernandez, 39 years old and aware of his HIV status since 1991, hates moments of inactivity and boredom. Still, at the airy, sunny home in San Francisco he shares with lover Derek and roommate Stan, Fernandez lives a rather domestic, no-bones-about-it existence. He spoke with *POZ* from a rare perch on the couch.

How has thinking about HIV become part of your daily routine?
It hasn't—I won't let it. Every morning, my lover, roommate and I all gather at the breakfast table: I do the crossword puzzles, we watch the Today show, I go to work. The only time I think about AIDS is when I have to tae my pills at night. Sometimes I'll get into bed and turn out the light and then I'll remember that I forgot to take the drugs.

Dance and the way I teach dance since my diagnosis—that is my spiritual point of view. I work with creating positive spiritual energies. And without wanting it to sound trite, the love that Derek and I have for each other really is a source of strength.

What's your current treatment regimen?
About a year ago I had a lump growing under the skin of my chest. It was really painful and was inhibiting my breathing. My doctors performed a local biopsy and an out-patient operation and couldn't figure out what is was. From the operation, they took out the part of the infection above the ribs and left what was under them. I was on PZA, a TB treatment, along with a B6 supplement for a year—and I just finished Sunday. (PZA depletes the body's supply of B6, which could cause jaundice, neuropathy and other things like nausea.) Whatever infection they were unable to remove cleared up with the antibiotics.

And you're not taking anything else?
No. I drink lots of bottled water to flush my system out. I try to keep a low-fat diet, but still eat everything. Each of us takes turns cooking in the evening, so there is a range with three different people cooking. Our roommate likes comfort foods—steaks dripping with gravy, hollandaise on the vegetables and cheese sauses—but we don't eat that way often. Generally we like to cook simple

things that have all four food groups, although we don’t go out of our way to eat something specifically.

What about opportunistic infections you’ve had in the past?
I had KS of the lymph nodes once and they used radiation therapy to treat it. It’s in remission as far as I’m concerned.

What was your state of mind when you tested positive?
Derek and I belonged to this organization that was throwing a party. We got there early to set up. And it was the same day we had to go find out our HIV status. We left the party to find out and both tested positive. We got very depressed, but went back to the party and numbed ourselves with stimulants. From the time that we found out, we’ve been very conscious of it. Not denying that we were positive at all, but holding it at bay and not letting it control our lives. But then I got this lump in my groin, and that kept growing and hurting and interfering with my dancing. I had to find out what it was and X0rays and CAT scans couldn’t decipher it. It turned out to be the modular KS.

Did you have a support system while going through all this?
Friends. I really try not to be depressed. My family is very supportive. Both of our families, actually, are almost completely accepting of both of us. They know about our status and my mom is always asking about our health and how many T-cells we have. She works in a health clinic and knows all the right lingo. And we have a pretty big circle of friends that are a major support to us. Some of them are HIV positive. Most of them aren’t.

And, of course, my dance helped me through it as well. Very much so. And one of the most important outlets for me is creativity—my choreographing. I have done many pieces about living with AIDS. In fact I recently got a cultural equity grant from the city to do a piece about different support systems called Living with Aides. It will be a full-length evening about duets and each duet is a different aspect of my support system. ‘

What kind of stories do you tell?
They are very positive, but they range—hopefully, to me at least—from very funny to very touching, loving duets with two men. There are always gay men in my choreography. And I try to be clever. My stories don’t always have a beginning, middle and wend. Sometimes they are just images. But humor is a major component of my choreography.

Does your HIV status have an effect on what you teach or how you teach?
I try to get people to understand the energies running through their body and to be in tune with what they are thinking and feeling. I enjoy teaching a great deal and because dance has helped me to deal with HIV, I can get people to understand their bodies, to build self-confidence and bring that positive light into them, to infuse their bodies with enough positive energy that missing a step won’t inhibit their flow of energy, and to get their endorphins working so that they won’t feel the pain of the physical workout as much.

Do you consider yourself an AIDS activist?
My activism comes out of my choreography. With my piece Living with Aides, I want to express to a general audience that HIV is not all doom and gloom and to give them a whole different sense of what a person living with AIDS goes through. I want to dispel the negative connotation of what living with aids means. To a person with HIV, I say, “Stay positive and think ahead. Keep thinking about the future.” I’m so caught up in the moment and what happens after that that I forget about things that will stop me from moving on. I could get frozen solid thinking about my HIV or my KS or anything else. I choose not to do that.

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