Thespian Avengers

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Pregnant Patricia finds out not only that she's positive but that she got HIV from her two-timing husband. Tonya has the virus but no insurance, so she'll do whatever it takes to get meds—including selling her body. And Freddie's trying to figure out how to hip his homophobic brother to a double whammy—he's gay and positive. The curtain has risen on *That's Why We're Here*.

What makes these characters different from your typical *dramatis personae*? They're all real, and the people performing the monologues are more than method actors—they're HIVers living their own major dramas. "They have an authenticity that no professional actor could approach," says Rutherford Cravens of Shakespeare Globe Center of the Southwest, who directed the production. "The audience knows that they're witnessing people telling the truth."

Part-documentary, part-therapy and more than a little consciousness-raising, the play grew out of the success of *Change Gonna Come*, a theater piece by recovering crack-cocaine addicts. Both shows were developed and sent out on the road by members of Motherland, Inc., a Houston-based social service organization. "We've learned that theater drawn directly from the lives of the performers has a unique power to move an audience," says MotherLand CEO Victor Ndando-Ngoo.

The monologues in *That's Why We're Here* were based on talks among the Motherland cast, which Cravens taped and edited. As rehearsals started, there was one main stage direction: Since it would hit too close to home for actors to do themselves, each had to perform the story of another. For Tom Anthony, watching another person enact his own experience coming out to coworkers—and hearing them blame him for getting infected—was both harrowing and transforming "It was very difficult," Anthony recalls. "For the first time ever, I choked up when I had to say, 'I have AIDS.' But then I felt a sense of renewal." The play will tour Texas schools, community centers, churches and prisons through 2001. Call MotherLand, Inc. at 713.290.0001.

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