Inviting Death to Tea

Broadway Legend André De Shields on Life, Career, COVID-19 and HIV

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André De Shields knows how to make an entrance.

At the beginning of the Broadway show Hadestown, which won the 2019 Tony Award for Best Musical, the house lights dim as the cast and musicians take the stage; that is, all but one of them. There's a pause, and then the final cast member makes his entrance to applause afire, slinking and sexily meandering through the company, weaving his way across the entire stage, every eye on him.

Lean and lithe with a mass of gray hair slicked back, De Shields is decked out sweet and sharp in a silver suit, perfect for his role as the god Hermes, who leads the audience on the glorious and tragic love journey of Orpheus and Eurydice. When De Shields reaches his place downstage right, he straightens his collar, fusses a bit and flashes the audience a smile as bright as the lights of Broadway itself. It's magic, and the audience knows it's in good hands with this master performer as he kicks off the show.

When POZ met De Shields for this interview, he made an equally impressive entrance at an elegant Manhattan restaurant. He was snazzily dressed in the fabulous red tuxedo—with a matching COVID-19 mask, of course—that he wears on the current cover. As he descended the grand staircase into the belly of the bistro, it was apparent that even if you didn't know who De Shields was, you definitely knew by how he carries himself—the expressive dancer's gait, the majestic air—that he is someone.

When told that his arrival at the restaurant resembled the big entrance in Hello, Dolly!, De Shields replies, "I do not want to do Hello, Dolly!" He pauses before turning back to say, "I do want to do Gypsy. 'Rose's Turn,'" he adds, referring to the number sung by the ultimate musical theater stage mother, a role originated by Ethel Merman and more recently played by Patti LuPone. "I want to do that."

No doubt that De Shields could be a brilliant Mama Rose. At 76, the Baltimore-born actor, singer, dancer, director and choreographer has been wowing audiences most of his life. He was the Wiz in the original Broadway production of The Wiz and was in the original Broadway casts of Ain't Misbehavin', the Mitchell Parish musical Stardust, Play On!, The Full Monty and many others.

What’s more, he’s had roles in numerous Off Broadway and regional theater productions, television, movies and, most recently, podcasts. And that’s not to mention his directing and choreographing credits, which include staging two Bette Midler musicals. Among his awards and accomplishments, he earned the 2019 Tony Award as Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his role in Hadestown, which is once again playing on Broadway after a hiatus due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions.

De Shields is a long-term HIV survivor, having been diagnosed early in the AIDS crisis. Yet he never missed a step, never let the diagnosis get him down. It seems nothing can stop this charming powerhouse.

André De ShieldsBill Wadman

How does it feel to be back in the show after Broadway was dark for so long?

It’s wonderful.

How long did you have to rehearse?

Two weeks. When former Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that Broadway was coming back, everyone thought, It is? He didn’t talk to Broadway about it. When it was asked, “How are we coming back?” no one had any answers. We are still discovering what those answers are, particularly because of the very strict COVID-19 protocols.

In the case of the Walter Kerr [the theater where Hadestown plays], 900 people are coming to the theater. We are not doing physical distancing. The audience members have to show proof of vaccination. They must wear masks during the performance. The musicians are all wearing masks—with the exception of the trombone player, because obviously you can’t play the trombone with a mask.

What other precautions is the cast taking?

We are all in masks until we are onstage. When we leave the stage, we are in masks. We have to do the RNA PCR tests twice a week, and we get our temperatures checked every day. It’s a necessary precaution, but it adds a level of experience to what is traditionally thought of as a very family community in the theater. The first day we were back, we all wanted to grab each other and kiss and hug, and then it was like, Oh no, we can’t do that. It’s not wise to do that.

You have to manage your affection.

Exactly. But in terms of performing, it is wildly joyful. The script is flipped, because it’s the audience who is in charge. They’re so excited that we’re finally back, not where we had started but at a new place that is even more valuable, more revelatory, more precious because we have been away from it for 18 months.

It was a celebration when we initially opened in 2019, but now it’s like a nightly baptism. It’s a ritual. I know this is going to sound over the top, but it’s the way we all feel. It’s sanctified.

If you think of going to a healer for therapy and you come away feeling cleansed and emptied out, that’s what I’m experiencing at the theater now, because we have so much that we want to share with one another. We are luxuriating in every moment, the expressions of overwhelming joy every night. Now, when Hermes starts that monstrously slow entrance from stage left, the audience is on its feet.

The magic and power of the theater. Emotions were so tough during the lockdown. You have to know that you are experiencing the emotions before you can make it better.

These should be life lessons that we are learning from this experience with the new pandemic, because it’s a wake-up call for humanity. We needed something shockingly, stunningly, differently, amazingly fearful to cause us to stop in the name of love.

Why did that big pause not happen when HIV was discovered?

Because that was the pandemic of the other. That was a pandemic—this is going to sound ugly, but it's exactly what happened—that was killing the people who were considered parasites and needed to die. We now understand how misguided and evil those thoughts were.

Tell us about your HIV journey.

I had taken Ain't Misbehavin' from Broadway to the West End [in London] in 1979. I got a telephone call from one of my colleagues back in the States saying that the gentleman who had been the hairstylist for the show had just died. I asked, "From what?" and the response was, "We don't know." He took a day off because he got a cold, but he didn't come back.

Then it happened a second time. A colleague of mine caught the flu and died. It's something we hadn't heard of before: the instantaneous death from rhinovirus or influenza in adults, in normally healthy people. Then, of course, the phenomenon continued until the best educated guess was GRID [gay-related immune deficiency], which made all of us whose sexual orientation was same-sex start to scratch our heads.

I returned from London to rejoin the original Broadway company to take Ain't Misbehavin' on its first national tour. By the spring of 1980, we were in Los Angeles for six months. One day, I'm preparing for the matinee, and I'm shaving. And I'm noticing that there are certain parts of my face that are tender to the touch of the razor. But then sometimes your face is just tender from having to shave so much. Then I begin to investigate, and, because I know my own anatomy, I say to myself, These are my lymph nodes. What could that be?

I saw a medical practitioner whose mind was as boggled as mine. Then certain questions that seem ridiculous were being asked. "Have you been kissing a cat?" I didn't own a cat! Ultimately, the decision was to biopsy one of my lymph nodes. I said, "No, if you don't have a clue as to what this is, I don't want you cutting me to find out."

I returned to New York and saw my primary care provider, but the story was the same. "We don't know what this is. We have to biopsy one of your lymph nodes." I went forward with the international tour. We started in London, came back and did the States and then were on our way to Paris. I saw a doctor in Paris, same response.

I said no to the French doctor, and then, as quickly as it came, the tenderness went away. It's the early '80s, so we have some information. We didn't know it's caused by a virus yet, but we did know the indicators: fever, swollen lymph nodes, that kind of thing. I thought that perhaps it was GRID. When we finally had the acronym HIV, I knew then that's what I had. It was the first conversation I had with death about myself.

I come from a family of 11 children, and I was 17 when my father died at age 50. I didn't know how to even experience his death because I was uninformed and unformed. I have now experienced

the death of nine of my siblings, plus my father, plus three of my life partners. Each time, I'd become more conversant with death. Each time death has said to me, "What about you? Are you ready to join me?" No, I'm not.

What this journey has taught me, metaphysically, is that death is not to be feared. It's to be managed, because we're all dying. Some of us are actively dying. Others of us are unaware of our dying until something catastrophic happens, and then it's always too much for us to even handle. Now when death makes a visit, I invite it in for tea.

When I had the clinical diagnosis of HIV, which wasn't until 1991, it wasn't a shock, because my eyes are open. I've lived with HIV for over 40 years.

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Has HIV affected any of your life choices or career?

Of course it has. In terms of romantic relationships [before HIV], one never had to say, before we become intimately involved, "You should know that I have a cold. You should know that I had the flu last week." But there was a time when it was absolutely necessary to say, "You should know that I'm HIV positive." But even that has morphed, because after years of testing and the advances in medication, I can't pass it on to anyone. I'm not contagious. It's still intelligent to say to someone I am HIV positive. But the metaphorical response now is: "Isn't everyone?"

How would you like to be described?

Do not describe me as a Black gay man. If you find yourself wanting to use a variation of that description, you may say, with my blessing, a Black man who is queer. That is because I learned this early in my life: I am thrice judged for punishment. First, for the melanin in my skin. Second, for the hubris in my character, because melanin should not have hubris. Third, for the expression of my sexuality, that I'm a Black man who loves other men.

But I am fortunate in my career and how people approach me. I was just in Colorado at the newly refurbished Colorado Academy [a pre-K through grade 12 school]. It's for young people who pursue careers in the arts. Before I performed, there was a dinner, and the children—they're free, they're honest. They're not suspicious of anything. The children just run up to hug you, grab you around the legs. The children love Hermes. One of the things that's great about Hermes is he's not a liar. He's authentic. That's the way I play him.

Your performance is a revelation.

I would like to conclude with a word from the network of Bantu languages that are spoken in the southeastern areas of the continent of Africa, and the word is ubuntu. It’s related to the yoga salutation namaste, which I understand to mean “the Divinity in me recognizes and salutes the Divinity in you.” Ubuntu means “I am because you are.” So that’s my final word: ubuntu.

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