Tribute: My Brother, My Self

Carl Vogel endures in his sister's acclaimed work and in his father's ASO

May 1, 1998 By Paula Vogel

When my brother first told me that he'd been diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma -- AIDS -- I gripped the phone, unable to believe that our time together was suddenly limited. Over the next 13 months of his illness, through the hospitalizations and endless doctors' visits, through the alarms set at four-hour intervals to remind us of the AZT dosages, it was as if we both lived our days listening to the ticking of a very large internal clock. I was seized by a panic that someday I would have to use the past tense to speak about Carl: "My brother *was* ... "

My brother was a librarian at the San Francisco Public Library. He had the kind of mind you want on your side during a game of Trivial Pursuit: A historian's recall coupled with an English professor's love of literature. He had a passion for both high and low art, sensing the aesthetic similarity between Tennyson and John Waters. He was also a political activist, a founder of a chapter of the Gay Activist Alliance, a participant in Students for a Democratic Society, an advocate of civil rights for everyone, a feminist.

January 9 of this year marked the 10th anniversary of Carl's death. It's hard for me to believe that a decade has gone by. The past 10 years have witnessed an evolution in the way society conceptualizes HIV. And an evolution for me as a playwright, in large part because of my brother's death.

I wrote my first breakthrough work, *The Baltimore Waltz*, in New York City in 1991, and it was produced Off-Broadway the following year to great acclaim. The play was inspired by a trip Carl and I never took. He had asked me to accompany him to Europe, but I didn't go, discouraged by the cost -- and unaware that he was HIV positive -- so he went without me. As I waited for Carl to die, I sat in the hallway of Johns Hopkins University Hospital, imagining the trip we didn't take and writing the play in my head.

It was then that I rediscovered something about theater that I had once known but forgotten: There is no past tense. One can write in the past tense in fiction and poetry, but in the theater, characters are always living in the present moment, with an ever-impending future right up until the curtain falls. At curtain's rise, *Hamlet* is alive with desires and goals; he's heading for a future. If in the course of the plot he dies, he lives his story all over again at the next evening's performance, forever captured in time.

As soon as I named the central character -- the brother -- in *The Baltimore Waltz* after my brother, I realized that Carl would be in the present tense for as long as the play is read or performed. In rehearsal halls, I have been able to say, “Carl is a librarian. Carl is the older brother. Carl wants.... Carl cares.... Carl will go to Vienna.” The play has been produced from Providence to San Francisco, Canada, England, Finland, Spain and elsewhere, including countless productions on college campuses. I was fortunate enough to attend a production in Brazil. True, they changed the waltz to a tango, but the love of sister for brother endured the translation.

I sat in the theater with Brazilians and heard the unmistakable love when the sister called her brother’s name: "*Carlo*!"

Shortly after Carl succumbed to AIDS, my father, Don Vogel -- who died last fall -- founded the Carl Vogel Center (CVC) in Washington, DC. CVC provides nutritional counseling and services, treatment information, complementary therapies (acupuncture, massage, Chinese herbal formulas) and a resource library, and sponsors educational workshops and town meetings with leading researchers and physicians. Its quarterly newsletter, *HIV Update*, keeps PWAs informed and empowered in their own decision making. It thrills me to know that throughout each and every day, someone answers the phone with my brother’s name, “The Carl Vogel Center.”

The day will come when we have found a cure for AIDS, and I wish Carl were with me to see it. I would have liked to discuss the Clinton administration with him. I wonder what he would think about *Angels in America*, marriages in Hawaii, *Ellen*. I still talk to my brother daily: Driving my car, watching my plays, each day when I open my eyes and when I close them. I still love my brother. As long as I have breath, that love will remain in the present tense.

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