Common Lives, Uncommon Art

A British Playwright explains why his AIDS oeuvre isn't about AIDS

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What deems a work of art to be "HIV positive"? Are those infected the only ones who are able or allowed to create such a work? Is the subject matter of HIV unique, somehow cut off from all previous experiences and expressions of grief, rage and loss? Visual artist Robin Whitmore and I have together created seven performance pieces since we started working in London in 1983. All of it has been made in the time of AIDS. For years people have been asking me when I was going to "deal with the issue" in my work. Well, it's 1997—I haven't, and I'm not about to.

I've always believed that realism is not the language that will win this year. As a performer, I've felt that something about acting the part of, or physically impersonating, someone with HIV or AIDS was odd, false, and even improper. Somehow, AIDS disrupted, in a new way, the neat parceling up of meaning into the conventions of character, plot and dialogue. I found I literally couldn't say what I meant. The grief and anger ran so deep that it seemed incomprehensible to me that some people couldn't feel it, didn't share it.

Our first works were gloriously messy, low-budget extravanganzas reveling in the fact that the fight survival was an old subject, layered by history. In Dressing Up (1983), we staged a three-part raid on the gay male wardrobe, from the shrieking dragged-up Mollies (London crossdressers) of 1720 to the black-tie Wildean dandies of 1895 to the would-be butches of the 1980s leather scene. In Pornography (1984), the text was 50 years of cheap porn. We submerged ourselves in the down-market end of the ghetto. No assimilation for us this was the apotheosis of sex as entirely divorced from love as the night-club is from the home. I remember Robin crouching like a dog in an aisle asking which way the punters wanted it. The question "Who here is gay?" sent a hundred hands up in the air. The question "Who here likes to get fucked?" produced one raised hand. "Who here loves another man" got only an uneasy laugh.

As the Thatcherite '80s got darker, our dreams got grander. We reimagined our city by staging Mozart's Magic Flute and Weill's Mahagonny on towering, preposterous sets built entirely out of cardboard and sequins. It was no accident that in both shows dreams were tested almost to destruction.

By 1985 something had to give. In the city around us, anti-AIDS graffiti proliferated and colleagues sickened. A rising tide of government homophobia culminated in the passing of Clause 28, a law designed to prevent education in schools on the subject of safe or decent gay lives. London nights

got wilder; this was the city of Leigh Bowery and Derek Jarman, Michael Clark, Gilbert and George. The funerals stacked up as the work of gay artists grew more violent, more reckless, more glamorous. It was no time to be reasonable. This was the summer we made our signature work, A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep. It was a fictional biography of the painter Simeon Solomon, darling of the Pre-Raphaelites, an eccentric, gifted ornament of the art-world parties of the 1870s. Just one week after being arrested while sucking the cock of a 60-year-old unemployed stableman in a public lavatory, 100 meters off Oxford street, Solomon was down, out, ostracized and forgotten. He was short, fat, ugly, redheaded, Jewish, alcoholic, queer—and unrepentant. He lived for another 40 years, endlessly reproducing his exquisite images of androgynous lovesick beauties as a pavement artist in London's West End. His survival, complete lack of shame, and above all, the great beauty of his paintings made him the icon in whom we placed our faith. If he could survive, so could we.

We staged history in a derelict, flooded Thames-side warehouse on the walls of which Robin scorched and scratched charcoal tears, flames and beautiful, broken-hearted faces; images of love wounded and oppressed. Impersonating the nameless model who appears in so many of Solomon's paintings, I stripped, shaved my body, dyed mt hair and played around stark-naked and alone for two hours: Ranting, preaching, singing, weeping, pouring out my heart, staggering through freezing water in gold stilettos, checking my body for the first signs of infection and for the wounds of assault, aching to be held and comforted—even walking on broken china at one point. Looking back, I can't quite believe how far I was prepared to go to show how deeply I felt both the attack on our bodies—by the disease and by the government—and the sheer unbreakable strength of our gay hearts, the determination not to be erased.

The series of theatre works I made next apparently head less to do with the head-on, confrontational approach of Vision of Love. But the work was no less passionate; in fact, it grew wilder. Racine's would-be empress, Berenice; Joanna Lumley reinventing the Bette Davis role in Maugham's The Letter; one gorgeous, fully uniformed cop and seven bleeding queer hoodlums toting a machine gun and diamonds in the English-language premiere of Jean Genet's lost play Splendid's—these were all fierce creatures. In all of those stories a heart cried out, risking death and ostracism. Bodies and voices turned into weapons and acted out a desperate rage to live. But HIV was not once mentioned. I was aiming too deep. I wanted to get people in the arse, the gut, the heart. I wanted to force them to imagine someone else's suffering.

It wasn't all agony. There were nights of great joy—glamorous, dragged-up extravaganzas staged, often as not, in pubs, clubs and the streets. The '90s have also been for me the decade of the great unacknowledged new gay art form: The benefit. Four-inch heels on an ice rink; Ian McKellen, Stephen Fry and Neil Tennant reciting Oscar Wilde's The Ballad of Reading Gaol after four hours of rehearsal; propping up Vanessa Redgrave in Trafalgar Square. The apparent subject matter of these events didn't have to be depicted. It was never spelled out. For one benefit. Robin created a giant canvas depicting a man in a vast, empty pool, striking out. No one had to ask what this painting was about. What has to be spoken of on these nights are the things of which we can barely speak: Anger and laughter in the face of death. The inflection of a voice, the defiance of a frock, the turning of a lyric, the glance that brings the house to its feet; this is where the art of our

times really lies. Look at what we use on these nights—variety, drag, musical theater; the art forms in which we embrace our past, honor every queen who ever made an art out of implying. This is the medium that vanquishes horror, dissolves despair and elicits laughter from those who have no reason to laugh.

Our most recent work is The Seven Sacraments of NicolasPoussin (1997). Having hired a lecture room positioned halfway between the maternity ward and the terminal ward in a London hospital, we retold the story of the body, from birth to deathbed, in the form of a meditation on a series of paintings by the French painter NicolasPoussin. Seventeenth-century religious iconography? The sacraments of the Christian church? Penance? Communion? Why? people asked. To answer, I donned the unlikeliest drag of my career: A doctor's coat and surgical gown. What appeared to be a medical lecture transformed into a recitation in which the English prayer books out the sacraments as the body makes its journey to death. As the body was stripped, examined and exposed, it found its voice—speaking of adoration, of compassion in the cold, neon-lit rooms of a hospital. Twisting and turning old ceremonies of love and loss into new shapes, I forced them to keep the promise of our childhood: That they would be there when we really needed them.

The piece ended with the simple image of a man sitting by a hospital bed, every detail of the setting real (the drip, the clock ticking away at four in the morning, the useless jug of water), except that the bed was empty, the pillow bearing only the trace of the head that had lain there. The vigil had no end. I stayed there, as one does on those nights, for as long as I had to; sometimes it took nearly half an hour for the last audience member to leave. For some, this was the image of an AIDS death; traumatic or peaceful, according to their own experience. For me, it was a re-enactment of my mother's death. Because the image bore no label, everyone saw it differently.

These are the gestures of performances and images that Robin and I strive for—ones that are common but suddenly flare up into new urgency and clarity. In the midst of a flippant, god-forsaken, pumped-up city, I think we all have a need to create a space for silence and meditation where we can sit with others and stare at life hard, long and quietly, as if it were a painting. Gay culture is very noisy, very busy, very crowded. Sometimes we need to just sit and be still.

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