



The Modern Art of HIV Disclosure

Actor and artist David Anzuelo kept his status a secret for over two decades.

September 25, 2023 By Charles Sanchez

A prolific actor, David Anzuelo, 57, is well known in the New York City theater scene and has performed in regional theaters across the country.

The queer Latino performer has also enjoyed success in film and on television. If you're a Law & Order fanatic, you may recognize him from various roles over the years—he's played everything from a gang member to a priest. He is also a playwright, a director and a musician. On top of all that, UnkleDave's Fight-House, a theatrical fight and intimacy choreography company Anzuelo founded, has been nominated for three Drama Desk Awards, and his team is in high demand for theater, film and TV productions.

Anzuelo has also been living with HIV for over 20 years, but until recently, he kept his diagnosis from the professional arts community.

In the spring of 2023, his playwriting debut, *Día Y Noche* (Day and Night), was being performed off Broadway by the LAByrinth Theater Company in Manhattan. "I was doing an interview," Anzuelo says, "and the interviewer was a gay Chicano dude. We talked, and I didn't know we were on the record yet! I disclosed my status to him, and he put it in the article."

Anzuelo was nervous. Although his family, his husband and those closest to him knew he was living with HIV, many people in his life didn't know his status. He called the reporter. "I say, 'Hey, I didn't know you were going to include that in the article.' And he says, 'Well, I think it's really important.'" The journalist then offered to edit out the detail. At that moment, Anzuelo had a choice to make.

Anzuelo grew up in a Mexican-American household in El Paso, Texas, with his parents and a younger sister and attended college in New Mexico. “I got a BFA in acting from the College of Santa Fe,” he says. “I moved to New York City in ’89, but I’d been coming here since, like, ’82.” He would visit New York to attend the Primal Theater Institute at The Martha Graham School. “I got interested in physical theater,” Anzuelo says. “My dance teacher in college was a former Graham dancer, and she called them up and said, ‘He’s intermediate level—let him in the summer intensive.’”

“I arrived in New York on July 4 [1989], and by July 5, I was auditioning,” he says. “By July 7, I had booked my first paid performing job.” It was for Music Dance USA, a family-friendly music revue that performed at county fairs up and down the East Coast. Anzuelo played Elvis Presley. “Sometimes, we’d open for the Gatlin Brothers or Reba McEntire, but sometimes, we were the headliners, and our opening acts were, like, the racing pigs or the diving donkeys!” It paid \$400 per week. “Back then, that was a lot to me,” Anzuelo says.

In 1990, he booked his first TV job. “It was a miniseries, a follow-up to Michael Mann’s *The Drug Wars*, about the cocaine cartels in Colombia. That won an Emmy, so they made *Drug Wars 2*.” Although his role was significant and he earned a good salary, he was disappointed when the series came out. “They cut all my scenes,” Anzuelo says, “so I looked like a day player with only one line. That was hard.” He wouldn’t work in TV again for another two years.

Meanwhile, he worked at the art house Film Forum, waited tables on a dinner boat called *The Spirit of New Jersey* and was a salesperson at Footlight Records, a defunct record store that catered to musical theater lovers. “I worked at the Forum for a good 11 years, on and off. They always took me back when I’d come back from a gig,” Anzuelo says.

In his early 30s, he landed a job as a bootblack, shining boots at the notorious (and also defunct) leather bar *The LURE* (the acronym stood for “Leather, Underwear, Rubber, Etc.”) in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District. “My first night there, it was awesome!” he says. “They had this band there called Bile, and it was this intense industrial punk band with these huge tom-toms, and the lead singer had a box on his head that lit up from the inside.” Anzuelo says it reminded him of the Frankie Goes to Hollywood music video for “Welcome to the Pleasuredome.” He says, “And I was like, ‘I’m in New York. I’m really in New York now.’ And that was great.”

He also found more work in theater, paying his dues at such New York companies as the Latino INTAR Theatre and the experimental theater club La MaMa. He booked roles in short films, working alongside the likes of drag queen Candy Cane and *Rent* star Anthony Rapp. He also was cast as the lead in Bill Cain’s rap-infused drama *Stand-Up Tragedy* at The Apple Tree Theatre in Chicago, for which he won a prestigious Jeff Award.

David Anzuelo

Courtesy of David Anzuelo

In the fall of 2001, Anzuelo received some surprising news during a routine physical. At the time, he was competing regularly on the international level as a black belt in martial arts. "I was at the top of my game, in terms of the fighting tournament circuit. I was regularly bringing home gold medals and trophies," he says. At the physical, the clinician offered comprehensive testing for sexually transmitted infections, including for HIV. "Then they said, 'We need to call you back to talk about some things.'"

That's when Anzuelo was told he was HIV positive. He wondered whether it could be a mistake. "They said, 'No, we ran the test three times, and your [CD4] cells are below normal,'" he says. Anzuelo was in the best physical shape of his life and felt terrific. "It was a real head trip," he confides.

A week later, he was working on the soap opera *Guiding Light* when the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center occurred, devastating the city and the nation. "We were given the option of staying at the studio overnight or going home, so I chose to walk home." His diagnosis and the events of the day had him in a state of shock. "It was really weird to be working on television and to be a competitive martial artist but feeling like a zombie," he says. As he headed from the downtown TV studio to his uptown apartment in Washington Heights, he saw fellow New Yorkers covered in ash walking silently. "I thought, They look how I feel, which was dead."

Despite Anzuelo's low CD4 count, his doctor didn't start him on treatment right away. "He told me,

‘If you can hold on and keep your health, there are some new meds coming out that have less adverse side effects,’” Anzuelo says. Meanwhile, he tried several alternative treatments, like acupuncture, herbalism and psychotherapy.

You shouldn’t talk to anybody like that. You’re not paying attention.

“At the time, I was in a very toxic relationship,” Anzuelo recalls. “He [his partner] told me, ‘Would you just hurry up and die?’ And that actually helped me, because it made me really mad.” Anzuelo decided at that moment not to die and soon after moved to his own apartment.

He also had a toxic doctor. Anzuelo was 35 at the time, yet this medical professional told him he would die at 50 and that the last five years were going to be especially difficult. “Then he called me José. I said, ‘Who do you think you’re talking to? Whose chart are you holding in your hand?’” The doctor had confused Anzuelo with another patient.

“I said, ‘You are no longer my doctor because first of all, you shouldn’t talk to anybody like that, and second, you’re not paying attention to who’s sitting right in front of you and whose chart is in your hand.’” Anzuelo started seeing a new doctor who treated him with respect and kindness.

Anzuelo found additional support at New York’s GMHC (formerly Gay Men’s Health Crisis), where he was assigned a caseworker, and he found a gay therapist to help manage the complicated emotions surrounding an HIV diagnosis as well as the aftermath of 9/11.

Anzuelo decided to disclose his HIV status to his parents and sister. “They were devastated,” he says, “but supportive.” His family invited him to return home, but he chose to remain in the city. “I told them that the care is going to be better here in New York than in El Paso.” He also came out to a few very supportive friends. “And you know that boyfriend who wanted me to hurry up and die? He actually gave me some good advice,” Anzuelo says. “He said, ‘You hardly have any gay friends, and you’re going to need them.’”

Surprisingly, the theater groups that Anzuelo was involved in had mostly straight cisgender members. “It was strange. The circle I was running with—there weren’t very many gay people,” he says. “It was mostly very bro guys, and they couldn’t relate and had no inclination to relate.” Anzuelo says he’s now surrounded by a mix of queer and straight friends, which he describes as “very helpful.”

David Anzuelo

Courtesy of David Anzuelo

Anzuelo's HIV diagnosis also affected him professionally. "Before I went on meds, I was afraid of

bleeding,” he says. “One day, during [martial arts] class, we were sparring, and someone hit me in the nose, and I got a nosebleed. I freaked out.” He went and cleaned up the mess with bleach and made excuses to the class.

Anzuelo’s friends also noticed him losing weight. “I’d always fought at 155, and when I dropped to 140, people noticed and were like, ‘What’s going on?’” He quit fighting soon after.

“It was hard. I thought martial arts was going to be a lifelong thing. My father said something great,” Anzuelo says imitating him, “‘Mijo [my son], they’re not making many pirate movies! You are a professional actor.’ And that made it easier to retire [from martial arts].”

His doctor finally put him on HIV medications, but that first year was rough. “It took a while to adjust to the meds,” Anzuelo says, “and it affected my auditions.” His agents would be told that he was unfocused at professional interviews, that something was wrong. “I didn’t feel safe enough to tell [my agents]. I just told them I’m going through some stuff, blah, blah, blah. I had a lot on my mind.”

Once he started treatment, Anzuelo’s health began to bounce back. “The meds leveled me out pretty quickly,” he says, adding that his viral load was undetectable soon thereafter.

As he got older, he started to feel more comfortable disclosing, especially to other gay artists, who weren’t phased by the news. “I still hadn’t disclosed to my representatives or for bigger jobs,” he says.

It was April of this year, on the eve of his playwriting debut, *Día Y Noche*, that Anzuelo accidentally disclosed his HIV status to the reporter. When the writer offered to pull the disclosure from the published piece, Anzuelo wasn’t sure what to do.

For guidance, he reached out to friends, his mother and, finally, his professional representative. “My rep said, ‘I don’t think it matters that much anymore. Treatment is so good, and there are a lot of people coming out [with HIV]. I think it’s not an issue in any way for you.’” His friends were also encouraging and supportive, and his mother said that if disclosing would help others, he should do it.

“And so we did,” Anzuelo says. The article came out, and his fear that the disclosure might be detrimental to his career was quelled. “It didn’t make a ripple,” he says.

Currently, Anzuelo is as busy as ever, working on a variety of projects: acting, writing, a lot of fight and movement direction and intimacy coordination. “I just did a play off Broadway last season called *Shared Sentences* with Houses on the Moon Theater Company. That was a very good experience. And I presented an excerpt of a new piece called *The Boy Called Lobo*. I booked the national tour of *Girl from the North Country* as fight director and the Broadway production of *Merrily We Roll Along*.” And his HIV status hasn’t been an issue in any way.

Anzuelo continues, “I booked an episode of *American Horror Story*. But they cut the scene! I still

get paid, but I don't get to be in the episode." Some things about show business never change.

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