Don’t Mess With Mama

AIDS diva Nell Carter misbehaves

December 1, 1997 By Phil Geoffrey Bond

Nell Carter is beside herself.

“I just don’t understand it, Phil,” she says, pulling me aside at a poorly-attended press conference for the Families in Transition Act. “This is not important enough to be on channel two or four or seven? Why aren’t people getting out to promote this bill so these children can receive something? What the fuck is wrong with this country?”

The Families in Transition Act is a bill on the floor of the New York State Legislature that would provide financial assistance to AIDS orphans and enable mothers with AIDS to designate where their children would live in the event of their death. It’s also Nell’s most current AIDS advocacy project.

After recently completing the Broadway run of Annie*, Nell sat down with me to discuss her AIDS conspiracy theory, infamous temper tantrum and what* Annie *and AIDS have in common.*

Phil: When did you first become aware of AIDS?

Nell: It was 1978. We had hairdresser on *Ain’t Misbehavin’*. He was feeling fine. Next thing we know, he was looking tired. He went in the hospital and that week they brought us all in and gave us hepatitis shots because that’s what they said it was. I didn’t know it was AIDS until a year later, when I saw it in other people. It was just part of the business.

And your brother?

In September of 1988, as soon as he found out, he flew to California and lied. He said, “Sis, I have cancer,” and I just looked at him and I knew. There was a bed between us and we started to remake the bed. We didn’t say a word.

When did he die?

In the summer of ’89. The doctor called and said, “Your brother needs you to come down.” I got off the plan, I’m walking down the runway, and my sister meets me and says, “Nell, Bernard’s gone.”

The last thing I wanted to do was hug her-because that would mean it was true. That son of a bitch couldn't have waited 'til I got there. I went to the morgue and they pulled back the sheet. I started hugging him, and the guard pulled me away and I started fighting with him. Mean. That was the last time I was gonna touch my brother.

The bourgeois side of my family had already decided that the death certificate was going to say: Cancer! A lot of people in Birmingham, Alabama hate me because I'm the one who made it publicly known that he died of AIDS. And if they get this magazine, good.

You volunteer for Project Inform. How did you become involved there?

Bernard had just died. I accepted a date to sing for them so I could tell them how much I hated them. Because my money couldn't buy a damn cure and there was information out there and none of my "intelligent" friends knew about it. I cursed everyone out. Screaming, throwing things, because I wasn't told about Project Inform. I could've kept him alive! Then I met the staff and these people with AIDS, and I though, maybe this is my way-through my brother-of passing the word on.

What do you like about the group?

The information they distribute can save your life. Shouldn't you have the right to know about the latest cocktail? How the fuck do you think you got AZT? It was people like Martin Delaney who illegally brought it over! These people saved lives. It's not the government. Everybody smiles when they say "Clinton" and how much good is happening. Well, shut up! I hate that.

I think AIDS was man-made. When I was living in Vienna, everybody said it was a disease manufactured by the United States, and I believe it. It wouldn't be the first time these people have tried to annihilate a whole race. It would be so easy if they could wipe out the homosexuals and blacks.

So you see AIDS as an issue of race?

The cases that are most prevalent right now, from what I understand, are in young black women. What bothers me is when you hear it on the news or see it printed, there isn't a comma between blacks and the sharing of needles.

You used to sing in the Continental Baths in New York City. Bette Midler, who also performed there, has said that she feels remorse for what she sees as advocating the spread of the disease.

I can sympathize with her feelings. But it was spread in other places too, in heterosexual places. I feel remorse for anyone who's not here. But I have to admit that it was exciting, in a way, to feel free to do that.

Do you think some stars exploit AIDS?

God, yes! To push their new album and all this stuff. I hate being introduced as the star of Annie when I'm out doin' stuff for AIDS. *Annie* has nothing to do with this. Nothing!

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