



# And Now for an AIDS Performance That Reflects the Great Unknown

Jack Waters and Peter Cramer guide us through “Generator: Pestilence Part 1,” which includes a “scent score” and premieres in NYC.

February 19, 2020 By [Trent Straube](#)

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Underground artists and dancers Jack Waters and Peter Cramer are both living with and creating with HIV. They’ve been involved in AIDS activism and art since the epidemic first struck New York in the 1980s. They have protested with ACT UP, created films, performance pieces and installations for HIV arts group Visual AIDS, directed the collectively run arts organization ABC No Rio and produced countless other projects via their nonprofit, Allied Productions, Inc.

In 2006, Waters and Cramer began developing the grand, multimedia HIV-themed Pestilence trilogy. Following staged versions in Italy and Germany, the first part of the opus, Generator, premieres in the United States at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York City’s East Village on Thursday, February 20, and runs through March 1. Generator is an immersive experience featuring the band NYOBS as well as a “scent score.” POZ emailed the duo about their avante-garde work. Their responses have been lightly edited for clarity and length.

An image from "Generator: Pestilence Part 1" Courtesy of Allied Productions

The Pestilence trilogy is billed as "a meditation on the AIDS epidemic as cultural phenomenon"

that's "about how a virus can infect and affect us all." So far, so good. But then I got lost when I read that Part 1 "begins with a spark of energy triggering life on the planet. A cluster of single-celled organisms develop and evolve into clusters of prehumans. Science and mythology merge to create an origin narrative. Generator climaxes in a lyrical expression of language sung by the African spider god of stories, Anansi." Say what? Now I'm very intrigued—and a bit confused. For those of us not familiar with experimental theater, can you tell us what to expect from this show? For example, are there traditional narratives and character arcs?

JACK WATERS: My approach to this work comes from my background influenced by the German Expressionist movement in dance that has links to artists such as Alwin Nikolais, Hanya Holm and Pina Bausch. It is not a literal approach but grounded in science (physics, sociology, anthropology) that links to art. The explosion refers to theories of the creation of the planet that spawned the life-forms from which humans generated and sparked nonliving forms, such as viruses that have coexisted with us for millions of years. Anansi is an ancient mythological figure that connects human cultures through long expanses of time as well as through geographic distance. Anansi is most known in the West through the Br'er Rabbit tales written by the author known as Uncle Remus.

PETER CRAMER: You can't have HIV and not consider the creation of the world. Plagues have affected culture since recorded history, not just in terms of death but also of quarantine, persecution and scapegoating. Generator subverts any contemporary reading on AIDS. It doesn't use the social or political language or relationships that folks are constantly being presented in films, plays or books. If you're expecting a dramatic situation with an estranged family, wicked landlords and dying patients, you'll have to wait until the final part of the trilogy. Generator reflects the "great unknown" that is in itself a metaphor for the early years of HIV when no one knew what the hell was going on. Our approach is not traditional, as we come out of more contemporary knowledge of what theater can be and where it happens. Think of the happenings of the '60s, the Living Theatre, Fluxus, Dada and Surrealism. It's a spectacle for the senses which includes a scent score, installations and artworks on the themes of the Generator, each realized by the participating designers and performers.

[GENERATOR \(Pestilence Part 1\)](#) from [La MaMa](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Can you elaborate on how the trilogy, and specifically Part 1, deals with HIV/AIDS?

JACK WATERS: The connection to Africa and the history of slavery has great significance to me as an African American, particularly now at Black History Month. Like HIV itself, American slavery should have significance to all Americans, but these are stories that are easily and deliberately obfuscated and hidden in plain sight. Part 2 of Pestilence deals with the invasion of a then-decadent Egypt by the Kushite kingdom in Nubia, now known as Sudan. While that history was of a more restorative nature, it hearkens to models of colonization that will come later in the Pestilence cycle. I deliberately apply such shifts in the cultural and social fabric as a metaphor and a macrocosm of viral infection. Like HIV and the AIDS epidemic, these invasions neither respect borders nor discriminate among populations. Conversely, the results of plagues and colonization

are deeply steeped in the mechanisms of nationalism, racism, gender discrimination, economic inequity and so on.

An image from "Generator: Pestilence Part 1" Courtesy of Allied Productions

PETER CRAMER: Generator is our lives as HIV-positive artists and activists surviving the early years of the AIDS crisis—the hysteria and fear, the lack of medicine and health care, people confronting the government and big pharma. Finding the radical spaces of refuge and sanctuary that sustained us through our art-making—spaces such as nightclubs, galleries, gardens and, more specifically, Le Petit Versailles, Queeruption, Radical Faeries, ABC No Rio, MIX NYC, FRISE, Danspace Project and Visual AIDS.

The “Generator” team, including the band members of NYOBS Courtesy of Allied Productions

You conceived the show in 2006 in Italy and staged 10 versions—including shows in Venice, Berlin and New York—before this La MaMa premiere. A lot changed in the HIV world during that nearly 15-year period. For example, the advent of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U), not to mention social media. Did the trilogy change during that period?

JACK WATERS: The trilogy is a work in process. It is always changing and thus always reflective of the here and now. While the concept itself has been in place for some time, the execution of it is in the form of an extended structured improvisation...so that responses to current conditions are always applicable. Currently, the coronavirus is at the forefront of epidemic concern. For many in the West, HIV is treatable and therefore not as much of a health concern as hepatitis and HPV [human papillomavirus]. The broadness of the scope that Pestilence takes, abstract as it may be, gives us the opportunity to have conversations like this. Like many artists, my work is not intended to be contained by the proscenium, movie screen or the picture frame.

PETER CRAMER: The trilogy Pestilence is still underway. These various versions have manifested in films, performances, comic books and visual art. In that way, it reflects the ongoing AIDS situation—I was going to say AIDS crisis, but with the advent of [combination antiretroviral treatment in 1996] and the subsequent improvements, that crisis has shifted to managed care. This is a full-fledged attempt to bring it to a theater setting and still maintain the multidisciplinary approach to immersive experiences. Social media is a new kind of virus, and PrEP and U=U a new

way to evade disclosure, but these developments are not obvious to Part 1.

An image from "Generator: Pestilence Part 1" Courtesy of Allied Productions

What do you hope the audience takes away from Part 1?

JACK WATERS: That they feel they are and have always been part of a process of change that, while sometimes challenging, is ultimately rewarding in the ability to unify with others while cherishing individuality and embracing difference.

PETER CRAMER: Intrigue, wonder and a sense of hope. A curiosity to see what develops next in this cycle of works.

An image from "Generator: Pestilence Part 1" Courtesy of Allied Productions

What can you tell us about parts 2 and 3?

JACK WATERS: As the origination and development of the cycle was done at the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice and the [Emily Harvey] gallery in New York City, parts 2 and 3 will also be workshopped in Italy. La MaMa has expressed interest in coproducing the premieres of the next two segments of the Pestilence cycle. Part 2, Development, takes us through the medieval plague years to the establishment of the industrial age at the end of the 19th century. Part 3, Processor, starts with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century development of automotive culture, through the electronic age into the advancement of biochemical engineering. The cycle culminates in a present to near-future conglomeration of governmental/media/corporate digital dystopia.

PETER CRAMER: Themes specific to parts 2 and 3 have been manifested in Jack's comic Pestilence, which is a 10-book series, six of which are completed and available at [Printed Matter, Inc., the art bookstore](#).

Finally, what other projects are you working on that are accessible to POZ readers? What else would you like us to know?

JACK WATERS: My video (eye, virus) commissioned by Visual AIDS for Still Beginning, a series of videos for the [30th Annual Day With\(out\) Art 2019](#) was made in collaboration with Victor F.M.

Torres. It is streaming on [Art Forum](#) and [Vimeo](#). [Editor's note: You can watch it below!]

[Jack Waters/Victor F.M. Torres, \(eye, virus\), 2019](#) from [Visual AIDS](#) on [Vimeo](#).

On March 9, our band NYOBS, the musical core of Generator, will [perform at Mercury Lounge](#). Following that, Peter and I will present Remnants, a multiscreen extended cinema action at Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. NYOBS will most likely play live to the projections. We are in the process of transferring Remnants to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The MoMa acquisition will herald a new digitally based version of Remnants, with showings in New York City to be announced.

Keep in touch with us and our expanded community by subscribing to the mailings at our nonprofit arts organization, [Allied Productions, Inc.](#)

PETER CRAMER: All our work has been collectively based whether it is [through] our nonprofit arts organization or the public garden Le Petit Versailles. Art is a social tool best used to teach us about ourselves and the world we live in.

For Generator tickets and more information, [visit LaMaMa.org](#).

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/now-aids-performance-reflects-great-unknown>