The Re-invention Tour

The documentary *Strike a Pose* catches up with Madonna's Blond Ambition dancers. Two of them are long-term survivors now shining the spotlight on HIV.

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It's fitting that when POZ meets up with Carlton Wilborn and Salim "Slam" Gauwloos—two of the dancers made famous in Madonna's Blond Ambition tour and iconic "Vogue" video—they're both striking a pose.

We're at the Gibney Dance center near Manhattan's Union Square, in a spacious studio on an April afternoon, and they're posing for the cover of POZ. The photographer, Kyle Froman, is a former member of New York City Ballet, so the guys naturally begin comparing showbiz histories: making it to the finals on Star Search, auditioning with Jennifer Lopez and for Jerome Robbins and—as it turns out to the surprise of everyone—having the same first boyfriend.

The conversation is lively, informed and just a tad risqué—but never crude or cruel—exactly the qualities that drew the entire world to the boys of Blond Ambition 25 years ago, when Madonna's Truth or Dare, her documentary following the tour's backstage drama, opened in theaters.

The occasion of our photo shoot is another documentary, Strike a Pose, which had its U.S. premiere the night before at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York and is now, along with its stars, touring the global festival circuit. Codirectors Ester Gould and Reijer Zwaan, teenagers when Truth or Dare was released, had the genius idea to follow up with all the dancers. "They made such an impression on us, inspiring so many people to come out or just be who you are," Reijer says. "We wanted to know what happened to them. And when we met each of them, we were blown away by their stories."

To refresh your memory, in addition to Carlton and Salim, the Truth or Dare dancers included Jose Gutierez, Kevin Stea, Luis Camacho, Gabriel Trupin and Oliver Crumes III (the lone hetero). Mainstream moviegoers in the early '90s had never experienced anything like this: real, live gay guys whose kiki-ing and carrying on predated marriage equality, RuPaul's Drag Race, Grindr, Will & Grace, the Internet, even the first Clinton. And don't forget that 1991 also predated effective HIV treatment (combination therapy would arrive five years later; click here to read our feature on the evolution of HIV treatment). In 1991, the epidemic raged on and most folks equated gays with AIDS and AIDS with death.

A publicity still from the 1991 documentary “Truth or Dare,” from far left: Luis, Oliver, Kevin, Donna, Carlton, Madonna, Gabriel, Salim and, lying down, JoseGetty Images/Michael Ochs Archive/Handout

From today’s vantage point, it’s easy to forget that Madonna, with her trailblazing message of self-expression, gay acceptance and safe sex, was a much-needed ray of light in those bleak times. At one point in Truth or Dare, for example, she stops a show to talk about artist Keith Haring, her friend who had recently died. “I knew him as a man who had the courage to tell the truth,” Madonna says, flanked by her dancers. “The truth is, he was gay. The truth is, he had AIDS. And he said so to anybody who would listen. In memory of Keith, let’s tell ourselves the truth. Let’s face it together.”

So it’s particularly ironic and poignant to learn today, in Strike a Pose, that Carlton, Salim and Gabriel were secretly living with HIV during the tour—and that, because of stigma, none of them knew about the others’ status. In fact, their three stories offer a candid look at the reality of life with the virus—and its meds—during the past three decades.

First, there’s Gabriel, Madonna’s unofficial favorite, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1995. His mother, Sue Trupin, fills viewers in on his story, including the lawsuit he, Kevin and Oliver filed against the Material Girl. “The suit was more about business and getting what he earned,” Sue tells POZ. “I’m not as clear about this in the film as I wished I had been. The lawsuit framed it in such a way that it appeared as if it was, for Gabriel, a forced outing, and the media—and even the other dancers—appear to have thought that too. Actually, it was more about the dancers not being paid for Truth or Dare and then for Gabriel, who offstage did not love the camera, getting dinged with the French kiss. He hated the kiss scene because he felt exploited, and it made his boyfriend crazy.” She’s referring to the notorious scene in which Salim and Gabriel are dared to French kiss,

a provocative image for the early ’90s and the first man-on-man action many moviegoers ever witnessed. “Right off, Gabriel came out entirely to his family and friends, but at 20, he did not want to be an advocate or carry a flag,” says his mom, adding that, had he lived, he’d no doubt be proud of the film’s influence. “Gabriel was not ashamed of being gay,” she says. “He was ashamed of having become infected.”

Sue worked as a charge nurse for the Infectious Disease Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital—“My career there paralleled the epidemic,” she says—and yet Gabriel kept his diagnosis a secret until 1993, when he could no longer hide it. Sue got her hands on the new meds “pretty much before anyone else in town,” she says. “That was October 1995. Gabriel died in December. When he took the medicines, he suffered excruciating bone pain and could not tolerate them.”

Strike a Pose is a “sensitive, fascinating and very wise film,” Sue says. “Hearing Salim’s and Carlton’s stories did lead me to ponder again why it is Gabriel who did not survive. But I have long ago put those sorts of considerations to rest. Sort of like saying as a mother, ‘Why me, why my son?’ when one can just as easily ask, ‘Why not me?’”

A publicity still from the 2016 documentary “Strike a Pose,” clockwise from far left: Salim, Oliver, Carlton, Kevin, Jose and LuisCourtesy of Strike a Pose/Linda Posnick

Carlton learned he had HIV in 1985, in Hawaii, while on the road with the Hubbard Street dance company. He disclosed to the women and men he was sexually involved with—he doesn’t identify

as gay or bisexual; “I prefer to just say I’m free,” he says—but otherwise he kept his status “100 percent secret” for nearly two decades. During Blond Ambition (and Madonna’s Girlie Show tour), he felt “ramped with fear and hatred,” terrified of becoming ill and jeopardizing his career.

He did, however, start to take HIV meds as soon as they became available, including AZT (Retrovir) and ddI (Videx). He experienced some extreme reactions, he recalls, and took periodic breaks (these so-called drug holidays were a common practice back then). Eventually, in 2004, he found a combo that worked for him and has kept his viral load undetectable.

In 2007, as a way to publicly disclose his HIV status and inspire others, Carlton self-published an award-winning autobiography, Front & Center: How I Learned to Live There. He has kept busy as a life coach, dancer and actor. He earned a GLAAD nomination for his role on the TV series The Mentalist and currently stars in the Lifetime movie Troubled Child. Then there’s Danceformation, the movement-based life-coaching workshop he developed and teaches across the country.

Strike a Pose, he says, has been an unexpected pleasure. “The great thing about this time in my life,” he says, “in comparison to the Truth or Dare timeline, is that all the stuff that was in my way—the lying and the self-hatred—it’s not happening now. I get to be in these moments of goodness and be available for it.”

Carlton also makes himself available as a mentor of sorts, for example when Salim calls to ask for medical advice. The two men, like the other dancers, first reconnected two years ago while filming Strike a Pose (the exceptions are Jose and Salim, both of whom live in New York and remained in touch). “It’s a bit strange to be able to call Carlton and ask him about doctors,” Salim says, “but it’s nice.”

For a decade, Salim had no one to talk to about HIV. Originally from Belgium, he was diagnosed with HIV in 1987. “I was uneducated about it, just a kid out of ballet school, and I had only had sex one time,” he says, then adds a dose of levity: “I didn’t even get to be a slut!” Salim didn’t tell anyone about his HIV, not doctors, not even Madonna. “I thought about [telling her during the tour],” he says, “but I would have been a Debbie Downer. And it was such a great moment, and I needed that moment to escape and survive.” After the tour, he turned to drugs and denial to cope. Complicating matters, he lived in the United States without a work visa and therefore couldn’t find employment. Homeless, he couch surfed until pneumonia landed him in a hospital in 1997. “I really thought I was going to die,” he recalls, “but the doctors started me on the new HIV cocktails, and in two weeks, I was released.”

With the help of the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), Salim got connected to care and has remained undetectable, but his real lifesaver, he says, is the man he recently married, Facundo Gabba. Since the 2000s, Salim has performed on Broadway and taught dance, but he’s really excited about a new role he’s taking on, that of HIV advocate.

After all the voguing and hiding, he’s finally ready to talk. He chose Strike a Pose as a venue to disclose. “My biggest fear in life was for people to find out I was HIV positive,” he tells the dancers in one of the film’s most emotional scenes. “I never wanted to share this story with anyone except

you guys. That moment when you get diagnosed, your whole world just falls in. And now I finally want to be free. I want to share my story, like Carlton."

To which Carlton responds: "There's a massive degree of new light that's going to happen because you took this move. It's amazing, Slam."

Both of their stories resonate as empowering, but the discerning viewer, after the lights have gone up, might be left wondering whether the movie risks defining the dancers by their illnesses or challenges. For example, we don't learn about Carlton's acting success or his book—only his HIV. "Our film does indeed deal with the struggle to get free," codirector Reijer tells POZ. "It's a film about overcoming shame." Referencing the storyline about Luis's heroin addiction and recovery, Reijer points out that "even though all of the dancers have gone through some very dark moments in their lives, they've found the strength to get back on their feet. We hope that's inspiring."

Back at the POZ photo shoot, Carlton reflects on viewers' reactions so far. "It's a powerful film and making a big difference," he says, noting that teary-eyed audience members have stood up to announce that they, too, are HIV positive and to thank the dancers for speaking the truth.

Is it possible, we wonder, for Strike a Pose to do for HIV what Truth or Dare did for homosexuality: normalize the issue while bringing it to the forefront of public discourse? "What's really amazing," Carlton says, "is that [codirectors] Ester and Reijer are able to capture what the brand has already been but give it a wider point of view."

While rewatching Strike a Pose, Carlton was impressed all over again by his fellow dancers. "These guys are so raw and transparent," he says. "They're amazing—they've always been amazing. The powerful way they're showing themselves in this new project is exactly what Madonna got drawn to when she cast us." Back then, Carlton says, he and the other dancers hadn't planned to speak out as advocates—Madonna put them in that role—but "now, we stand in for the things that she stood for." They're the ones front and center, ready to express themselves.

Click here to read our in-depth Q&A with Carlton and here to read the Q&A with Salim.

Click here to go behind the scenes of our July/August 2016 cover shoot and watch an interview with Salim and Carlton.

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