Remembering Terrence

In an article titled “Remembering Terrence McNally,” Tom Kirdahy, the late playwright’s spouse, honors him in a speech given at the 2021 live concert Remember the Ribbon: A Tribute to World AIDS Day. Below is an edited excerpt.

February 14, 2022 By Tom Kirdahy

Terrence wrote fearlessly about HIV and AIDS. He had no patience for artists who chose to ignore the disease. He thought the closet was murderous and artistic indifference was immoral. Terrence thought it was a sin not to write about AIDS, and so he wrote passionate plays that challenged the world to respond to HIV with love and action. It is a point of great personal pride to me that Terrence never stopped writing about HIV, even when it seemed to some less fashionable to do so.

Terrence’s plays ran the gamut of emotions and perspectives. Whether it was Andre’s Mother, where Terrence explored a mother’s pain as she couldn’t accept her son’s sexuality or the cause of his death, or Mothers and Sons, when some 20 years later he brought that same character back to examine the stultifying effect that having rejected her son had on the rest of her life. But in the latter play, Terrence also went searching for forgiveness and hope—recognizing the self-inflicted wounds of parents who lost their children before it was too late to tell them they loved them and perhaps providing a road map for those parents who were entrapped by their own homophobia.

In The Lisbon Traviata, Terrence explored the deep and harmful impact that came from fear of intimacy in the face of HIV, and in Lips Together, Teeth Apart, Terrence found a way to look at AIDS through the prism of a pair of straight couples on Fire Island whose homophobia and fear of transmission deprived them of the joy of sibling love and community. From Frankie and Johnny to Some Men to Some Christmas Letters, Terrence wrote about HIV.

He was a truth teller. He was a believer in community. He was unapologetic in his outrage at government inaction and society’s indifference to people living with HIV. In Corpus Christi, he exposed religious hypocrisy and made plain his belief that the queer community had a rightful place at the table of faith. Ministering to people with HIV and AIDS was a moral obligation and the only legitimate response to anyone claiming a spiritual path.

When Terrence died from complications related to COVID [in March 2020], it was not lost on me that a pandemic fueled by government ineptitude took him from us. I have struggled to reconcile the pain of losing him with how he died. I often wonder what he would be writing right now. I know he would be writing about HIV and COVID and the importance of human connection. He would be teaching us about kindness and artistic integrity. He would be reminding us that art has the

capacity to change lives; to galvanize; to humanize; to hold us accountable.

He would be connecting the dots of history and showing us a way forward. He would be imploring the next generation of writers to expose a society that relegates queer and BIPOC [Black, indigenous, people of color] folx to second-class citizenship. He would rage at a society that acquits Kyle Rittenhouse when George Floyd and Breonna Taylor can be murdered in cold blood. He would recognize the relationship between systemic racism, transphobia, homophobia and the continued spread of HIV.

He would not be writing about COVID at the expense of HIV/AIDS. He would be reminding us that we forget history at our peril, that they are related. I know he would be writing about long-term survivors and that the HIV pandemic is not over. Indeed, he would be demanding from us that we never forget.

I am so thankful that I have his words to inspire me to keep fighting. Let the red ribbon remind us of our obligation to keep agitating for change, to keep alive the memories of those lost to AIDS, to never forget the long-term survivors who need our help and support and to remind future generations that there is a better, more humane path forward.

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