Scenes From Real Life

An immersive play for and about Black gay men in the South

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A barbershop. A church. A gay bar. A living room. These are places where the lives of Black gay men in the South unfold. They're also where scenes from As Much As I Can are enacted. In this "immersive theater experience," audiences walk through rooms with the actors (as opposed to sitting passively in a seat while watching the stage). Produced in Baltimore, Maryland, and Jackson, Mississippi, the show was created by and for Black gay men in these cities as part of ViiV Healthcare's Accelerate! initiative, a four-year $10 million program to improve the health and well-being of this population, which has been hit hard by the HIV epidemic.

Theatergoers literally follow actors from room to room as the men experience stigma at a church service, get tested for HIV at a clinic, and navigate love, disclosure and intimacy in their personal relationships.

"The goals were to broaden and continue the dialogue around HIV," explains Marc Meachem, ViiV's director of external affairs. Audiences seemed very receptive, he says, noting that "people stayed for the talkbacks and showed no signs of wanting to leave. It was a deep, impactful dialogue."

These conversations are vital to closing the HIV disparities among people of color. To beat the epidemic, Meachem says, we need to engage people outside the world of public health and AIDS organizations. "We need real people to talk about HIV and to educate and support each other." Thanks to projects like this, more of these discussions are taking place in barbershops, gay bars and living rooms across the South.



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