Disco Realness

A new musical channels the life of dance legend Sylvester.

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Anthony Wayne as Sylvester, the Queen of Disco

Like most everyone on the planet, Anthony Wayne and Kendrell Bowman were familiar with Sylvester's hits "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" and "Do Ya Wanna Funk." But after the couple watched a 2010 Unsung documentary about the disco queen, who died of AIDS complications in 1988, they were so moved that they created a concert of his music.

The show was a hit. It didn't hurt that Wayne is an accomplished Broadway star (recently in Pippin and Anything Goes) and Bowman is a celebrity stylist (it takes a professional to re-create Sylvester's gender-bending looks). Now, nearly three years later, an expanded version of the show—Mighty Real: A Fabulous Sylvester Musical—is playing September 5 through October 5 in New York City, with plans to move to a bigger house soon.

"It's like a disco party that tells a story through his music and his words," says Wayne, who wrote the concert musical. "We tell not just of his dying of HIV but also about his partner and how it was during that time. But even in 2014, people don't like to talk about HIV, especially in the African-American community, so here is a chance to bring awareness through Sylvester's story."

To that end, Wayne and Bowman used Twitter to reach out to celebrity activist Sheryl Lee Ralph, who is now co-producing; part of the show's proceeds will go to her D.I.V.A. (Divinely Inspired Victoriously Anointed) Foundation, which she started in honor of friends lost to the virus.

Like Sylvester, the musical transcends boundaries. "It's not a gay show, it's not a black show, it's not a disco show," Wayne says. "It's a show of feel-good energy."

And it's inspirational. "It's about knowing you can persevere through anything, just like Sylvester did," Bowman adds. "There are pictures of him going to a Pride parade in a wheelchair, just showing people that you shouldn't be ashamed to live your life to the fullest." That's keeping it mighty real.

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