Eli Rarey: ’I accept who I am and the choices I’ve made, and after all, I’m feeling pretty positive about it.’

February 17, 2015 By Visual AIDS

From left: Aaron Stella, James Cerne, Brenden Shucart, Matthew “Mouse” Smith, Eli Rarey, Torrie Gregor, Shannon J Ward, Deanna Neil, Kyle Kupres.

From the moment of transmission, HIV is a shared experience, yet living with the virus can be isolating. Stigma and discrimination often lead people to keep their status to themselves or between them and limited healthcare providers. This narrative is even more true for many people diagnosed post-1996 / HAART. Coming of age in the second silence of the virus, there has been limited to no community support for the newly diagnosed, open kinship among people living with HIV, or publicly acknowledged Poz / Neg relations. That is one reason why Hard Decisions, a choose-your-own-adventure web series by Eli Rarey, is exciting. At its core, the series is about a dude trying to make his way in the world, navigating lunch choices, issues with his boyfriend, and his HIV status. The show is structured in a way that the main character needs others--us as viewers--to be part of what shapes him. It is an acknowledgement that not only are we never truly

alone (for better or worse) but that we literally can't live without each other. Taking this to the meta level on the occasion of a Kickstarter launch enlisting the assistance of others to fund the series, Rarey speaks with Ted Kerr about community, influences, and the way the project is deeply informed by activist, actor and writer Brenden Shucart.

Where did the idea for the choose your own adventure web series come from?
I loved the choose-your-own-adventure book series when I was a kid, and I'm always looking for ways to do something new with movies. I used to teach a filmmaking class at the Interactive Media Division at USC School for Cinematic Arts, and we would always talk about branching narrative and why it doesn't work. So it got me to thinking how to make it work.

Why don't branching narratives work?
Well, there are people who have done branching narratives before, but I always feel like it seems a little bit arbitrary. Like you get these questions, "Do you want to fight the dragon or hide in the cave?" So you arbitrarily choose one. But when you're watching a movie, you want to identify with the characters, and those kinds of choices define who a character is. So it's hard to have character development when you make these choices for the character.

With our show we try to make the choices the kinds of choices that don't necessarily define who a character is, like whether to get Thai food delivered or whether to go out to a restaurant, but still choices that end up completely changing your destiny. Hopefully it lets us have real characters that people can identify with but also meaningful choices. It's kind of an experiment.

I see a parallel between "Feeling Pozitive"--the song you sing in the Kickstarter video--and the idea of choose-your-own-adventure. Am I being too obvious here? What does the song mean to you?
There's no question that they're related. The chorus of the song is, "I accept who I am and the choices I've made, and after all, I'm feeling pretty positive about it." In the show, Brandon (the main character) is a little bit neurotic. He is constantly stressing out about these really minor decisions, but the truth is that really minor decisions have really major consequences. At some point I think we have to stop torturing ourselves about the choices we make and just enjoy our lives. Even if we're living with HIV. Maybe especially. I'm HIV negative myself, so in some ways I'm writing someone else's experience.

Are there people living with HIV involved in your production? There is a phenomenon of artists making work about their fear of HIV, or the experience of growing up hearing about HIV, but we don't always get to hear enough from people living with HIV.
Brenden Shucart is playing the main character, Brandon. In addition to being an amazing actor who has been in movies like Interior: Leather Bar, he's also a really outspoken HIV activist. He has written articles and blogs about his experience, and he's on the board of Project Inform. It was important to me to include him in the project. I consider him more of a collaborator than someone that I cast. I didn't audition him for the part, I asked him if he was willing to do it. If he had said no, I might not have gone ahead with it.

Why is that?
It's great to try and tell stories that are different from your experience, but it's important to me to have your work validated by people from that community. People who have actually lived that experience. If Brenden had been like, sorry, this is not for me, that would be a signal that maybe I got it wrong. But so far everyone I know who is HIV-positive has loved the song and the story and the project. There are also a few people in the cast and crew who are in serodiscordant relationships, which is another theme in the movie, because Brandon's boyfriend, Jeff, is HIV negative.

So many familiar faces in the cast. Has social media made a star out of everyone?
Ha!

Can you tell us a bit about the creative community you are in in LA?
Maybe social media has made stars of everyone, but to me these guys are superstars. I feel very lucky to have this group of people working together. Two years ago, I didn't know any of these people, I had just split up with my husband and I had just moved into this tiny studio apartment in Silver Lake. I was going out to nights like BFD and Cafeteria by myself, just trying to meet people. And little by little I started seeing the same faces again and again. If you had told me then I was going to make a web series with Kyle Kupres, Mario Diaz, Chad Sanders, James Cerne, and Brenden Shucart in it, I would have thought you were crazy. Or I would have got on my knees and prayed you were right.

People often say the West Coast is less uptight about sex, including HIV status. Does that ring true to you?
I don't know if that is true or not. I lived in New York for years, but I never really spent time in the gay scene there. I lived there when Mario Diaz was throwing legendary parties in the East Village, and I feel like I totally missed out. I think there are always groups of people who are willing to challenge the accepted boundaries and live their lives...should I say it? People who are willing to be positive about it.

Who are some artists that inspire you?
A lot of the artists who inspire me are in the movie! I'm totally inspired by the whole Slamenskraam phenomenon, what Kyle Kupres and Aaron Stella and James Cerne created with that, not just making clothes but creating this whole kind of world. Dean Littner is a huge inspiration to me, I worked on his newest installation into the Friend Add movies. I don't know that I would still be making films if it wasn't for seeing what he's accomplished.

What do you mean?
I made a feature film in 2012, The Famous Joe Project, and I love the movie but the process of getting it out into the world was so painful, and it was complicated by personal things that were going on in my life at the time. I was pretty much a one-man distribution team. Even though the film had a great reception at Outfest, it was so hard to get people to see it after that. You can't help but get this feeling that no one wants your movie, after you've put this huge amount of work into it. And yet everyone who saw the film loved it. It makes you wonder what's going on if you're

making work that is good, but you can't find a way to get people to watch it and find out how good it is.

Do you think the industry makes that difficult?
I'm not sure it's more difficult than it was. It might just be easier to make movies, so there is more work out there. That's why I'm getting more inspired by artists that I know now. I'm inspired by seeing their whole lives, not just their work. My neighbor Ben Cuevas is a very inspiring artist, he creates really interesting work that combines his presence as an artist with the work he is making, like when he knits a full body suit for himself in the gallery and then wears it. There is a whole group of artists and performers who are making work in Los Angeles, getting seen at events like Planet Queer at Akbar, which is a series that Ian MacKinnon puts together. You have people like Steven Schweickert (aka Themegoman), Jason Jenn, Steven Reigns--they're all making amazing work and you can walk up to them afterward and talk about it. If you're very lucky, you do a lot more than talk.

You have something like kickstarter, it literally lets you enter the creative process at the beginning, have direct contact with the artist. I've become friends with people I didn't know at all by backing their projects on Kickstarter. I think that's so important, that you're not just going to the movies and seeing the finished product. As an artist, you have to remember that all these people who are making amazing work that you admire, they're all struggling. We're all struggling to get the work out there, wondering if it's good enough. I'm becoming more and more inspired by the people close to me, rather than looking to artists who are accepted or successful or dead. Not that I'm not inspired by people like Andy Warhol, but knowing the people I know now puts all of that into perspective in a way. You stop treating these artists like gods, and you start treating them like people who were just like you, trying to make work, hoping that it's good, hoping that it gets out there and has some effect in the world.

Visit the Kickstarter to learn more about Hard Decisions, and support the project.

Rarey is offering Visual AIDS blog readers a free promo code to watch his film, The Famous Joe Project. Go to: https://vimeo.com/ondemand/29732 and enter promo code: visualaids2015

Eli Rarey is a filmmaker, poet, playwright, and storyteller who focuses on issues around sexuality, narrative, identity and faith. He was a founding member of the collaborative theater company SCIENCE PROJECT in New York City before moving to Los Angeles to complete his MFA at USC School of Cinematic Arts. He has directed music videos, short films, and video installations. He is a media columnist for the online journal Ohio Edit, and his first feature film as writer/director, The Famous Joe Project, was released internationally on iTunes, Amazon, and Vimeo this year.

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