NYT Pundit Frank Rich on AIDS

October 26, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Frank Rich, a former theater critic and a current op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*, recently interviewed musical-theater legend Stephen Sondheim.

Author and columnist Dan Savage before that interview spoke with Rich about numerous topics, including the theater, LGBT civil rights and AIDS.

Here's an excerpt:

Savage: Of all the bigfoot pundits out there, you seem to be the only one who takes the issue of gay civil rights seriously and is willing to devote really serious real estate to it in your column. Why is that?

Rich: I can't speak for why others don't do it. I am baffled by it. It seems to me such an obvious civil-rights issue. In my case, I got interested in it and my eyes were opened precisely because I covered the theater. In the 1980s, which was the bulk of when I was a *Times* drama critic, to the early '90s, two things happened in New York theater. One was unfortunately the arrival of

Andrew Lloyd Webber and the other was the AIDS epidemic, and it was eye-opening. It was literally happening on my beat; people, artists I admired, were dying, getting sick and dying. In some cases, you'd hear about people's deaths well after the fact, particularly if they weren't famous in the theater, or under mysterious circumstances in those days. Of course a lot of people don't even remember this history now, but you certainly know it, and it really had the effect of--I guess I wouldn't say radicalizing me, but really opening my eyes to a whole minority of America that had been shabbily treated, that had to often live in secret, and was now being victimized by a ruthless epidemic, while a lot of people stood around and did nothing.

So at first, it really changed my view of things; it really opened my mind to stuff I hadn't, embarrassingly, given much thought to. And then of course, what happened was that theater itself began to take AIDS as a subject, but that's already well along in the story. You'd have to have been dead to be on the beat I was on and not say: "What the hell is going on here?" And so it stayed with

me.

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