

Overcoming Stigma Through Design:
It's My Party – A Multimedia Dance Theatre Production
by
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ABSTRACT

This document analyzes the use of the Principles of Design within the applied project *It's My Party*, a multimedia dance theatre production, as a means to address and overcome the stigmatization of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Through the orchestration of dance, music, props, acting, video, and spoken word, this interdisciplinary work investigates how these production elements synthesize into a transformative theatrical experience for audiences. Outlined in this document is the eight month design process. The process included concept design, assessing, processing, customizing the message, script development, rehearsals, and video production, and concluded with an evening length production. Analyzed through the structural narrative of The Hero's Journey, this autobiographic work details the author's HIV-positive (HIV+) coming out story from a restorative narrative perspective. By addressing the subject of HIV from a contemporary point-of-view, this project strives to reencode the troubling associations affiliated with HIV with an empowered and hopeful understanding.

DEDICATION

To mi familia and friends.

Thank you for believing in me and this work.

You are my everything.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PREFACE

"We need never be ashamed of our tears."

Charles Dickens, Author of Great Expectations

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It is important to me to note that approaching the disclosing of any personal subject is not a feat that is easily done. Needless to say, there are many personal hurdles one goes through whenever contemplating being public about any personal information or "kept secret." These hurdles commonly take the form of insecurities, vulnerability, stigma, shame, and consequences. And these are only the personal hurdles that one sets before himself or herself. The challenge of disclosing does not take into consideration the additional hurdles that may be set before that individual from outside agents such as family, friends, lovers, or strangers, or even from outside entities such as religious institutions, political platforms, social mores, etiquette, and discrimination to name a few. There is a lot to contemplate when approaching disclosing one's HIV status in any public arena, whether to a party of one or to a crowd of many. In my journey, before I could take ownership of my story, I first had to work through these hurdles on my own. It is worth noting that my coming to terms with my diagnosis began a year before I started rehearsals for my applied project. Even then, as I moved forward with my applied project and writing this document, I continued to learn, process, and accept my condition. Although I am now comfortable publically sharing my story, individuals should not feel pressured to disclose a challenging personal experience if they do not wish to, however individuals should not feel they have to hide their story because of shame.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND: THE ORIGIN OF LOVE

*"I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadow;
if I fail, or if I succeed at least I did as I believe."*

Whitney Houston, Greatest Love of All

2

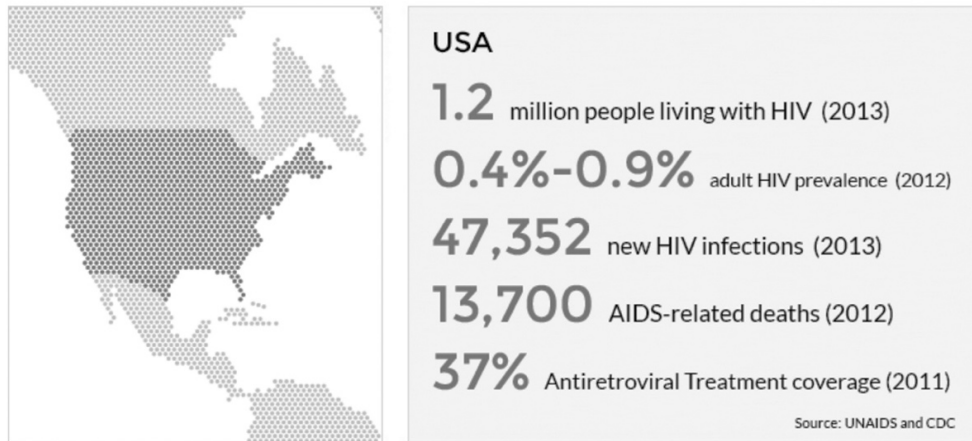
Nearly three years ago when I began my graduate studies at Arizona State University (ASU), I walked into the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in dance program with my ambitions in hand, looking forward to the day I would start work on my applied project. As a dancer with an interest in video, my dream was to create a multimedia production that would incorporate video, spoken word, props, set design, and dance. The story, however, I was uncertain of at the time. All I knew was I wanted to visually interpret the saying, "there are two sides to every story." As a seasoned graphic designer, I have been trained in the ways of storytelling and leading a reader persuasively, directly, instructionally, visually, and even emotionally through a message. Little did I know that a year later, after I had begun my studies, I would discover the story for MFA applied project, which was a story of comedy and tragedy.

My Story

Alone, I sat on the concrete steps of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., gazing upon an evening sky brought to life by fireworks. Our nation was turning another year old. All I could think about was "how was I going to make sense of this new year?" Seven days after the 4th of July, I sat alone on the examining table at George Washington University Hospital looking through an ordinary window at what I hoped was just another ordinary day. The doctor walked in, closed the door behind her, and without missing a beat jumped right into her report, "Your test result came back positive

for antibodies.” To ordinary ears on an ordinary day, this does not make much ordinary sense. When your doctor says, “I’m sorry but you have tested positive for HIV,” your ordinary day just became anything but ordinary.

On July 11th, 2014, I joined the estimated 1.2 million people living with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in the United States (People Living with HIV Stigma Index, 2008). Despite the fact that I was now technically 1 out of 1.2 million people living with HIV in the US, I could not have felt any more lost or alone in that moment. As I sat on the examining table no longer looking through an ordinary window, all I could think about once again was, “how am I going to make sense of this new year?” The journey I set forth on after that extraordinary day was focused on survival, self-perseverance, and as - my therapist identified- a constant habit of putting other’s needs before my own.



1

Instantly, I began my antiviral treatment, reached out to my immediate urban family of close friends in Washington, D.C., and scheduled doctor and counseling appointments. In ways you could say I had “done all the right things,” but there was something missing. Contrary to my gut instinct, my family– who was scattered across the western hemisphere–ended up being the last people to know about my diagnosis. Ironically, they were the first people I thought to call. But, how do you tell your family

over the phone you are HIV-positive (HIV+)? The idea of leaving them powerless to do nothing about it was incomprehensible. This instilled a hypersensitivity in me for the well-being of others and a sense of responsibility in how I disclosed my status. I equated disclosing my status to delivering a bomb. How could I lessen the collateral damage in the aftermath of disclosing?

I share this exposition not for dramatic effect but to share the origin of my most personal work to date. Though I stand as a much more collected individual, my journey towards finding myself again was constantly challenged with a lost sense of identity and community. If there were 1.2 million people living with HIV in the US, how could I feel like the only 30-something, Latino, gay, Capricorn-Aquarius cusp, Midwestern, first-generation Cuban/Bolivian, son, brother, tío, artist, dancer, scholar, and grad student with HIV? How is it possible that I do not see anyone else closely related to my demographic? How is it possible that I not know anyone of this description? This, I believe, has to do with the consequences of stigma that surrounds HIV and our nation's misunderstanding, misperception, and lack of social acceptance of this now medically declared chronic condition.

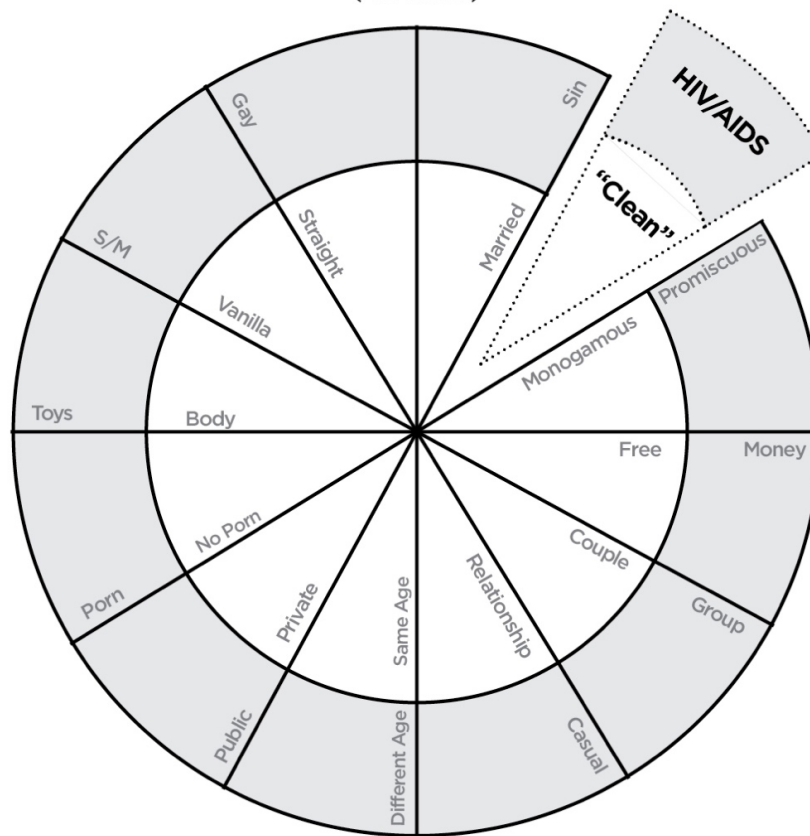
The Other Story

In contrast to the advancement of care, medication, prevention, and scientific understanding of HIV, there are few performance works that talk about the life of the newly diagnosed HIV+ individual today. Iconic works such as Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here* (Grubin & Markowitz, 1997) and the currently touring production *The Missing Generation* (2015) created by Sean Dorsey Dance have helped us remember, process, and cope with what the era of the AIDS epidemic entailed. However, these works tell us about the personal stories from the 1980s when the AIDS epidemic was most potent. As

important as it is to remember our history, it is just as important that we take a surveillance of the current cultural landscape.

As defined in the self-help book, *The First Year*, HIV stigma refers to the prejudice, discounting, discrediting, and discrimination of people who are perceived to have and do have HIV as well as anyone associated with them (Grodeck, 2003, p. 20). HIV stigma is a global issue, having been documented in over 65 countries (People Living With HIV Stigma Index, 2008). Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1984) further identifies the taboo subject of HIV in her proposed theory of the Charmed Circle. Through her research in sexual politics, Rubin looks at sexual hierarchies in societies and interrogates what defines “good sexuality.” Rubin proposes there are sexual activities and variables that are viewed more favorably or are more acceptable in a

The Charmed Circle (modified)



heteronormative society. For example, sex between a married man and woman is more acceptable than casual sex between two men. Although the Charmed Circle has not been updated since its conception in 1984, one could situate contemporary variables into its model such as physical health verses sexually transmitted infections, biological verses post-operation sex assignments, and face-to-face verse online dating. The concept of the Charmed Circle resonated with me because it perfectly illustrated the image of how I felt having been diagnosed HIV+. I very much felt like an outsider – an abnormal deviant that stood outside the boundaries of what society believed to be “good, pure, and normal.”

Prior to my diagnosis, I was not familiar with the latest medical facts about HIV because I was too scared or uncomfortable to ever do any additional research on the subject. The only people I ever really knew who were HIV+ were either a friend of a friend or were people I saw on TV. I knew nothing about HIV discrimination or the social injustices that existed both nationally or globally. I never really freely spoke about the subject because it felt too socially taboo to discuss openly, and, of course, I never wanted to be associated with a subject like that. I had no clear understanding of the biological operations, functions, or behavior of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus other than upon infection “it feels like having the flu.” I had no idea what the medicine regiment looked like other than the image of refrigerated bottles of AZT I had seen in the movie *Philadelphia*. If asked to describe what someone with HIV+ looked like, I would probably categorize them as having visible lesions, oddly proportioned bodies due to muscular dystrophy, thin faces, and frail bodies. And, lastly, if you were to ask me if I was the kind of person to ever stigmatize someone else based on a factual or assumed thought of being HIV+, I would have had said, “no.” Why? Because I am a compassionate and nice guy, and I would never judge someone or hold ill feelings towards them for

health reasons. Well, the year following my HIV diagnosis, I not only learned the correct answers to all these questions but, above all else, I soon realize just how much stigma I did harbor... towards myself.

I have always considered myself to be a confident and accomplished man. At 34 years old, I felt I had lived a very fulfilled and successful life. In school, I was very accomplished having received numerous grants, awards, scholarships, and fellowships. Creatively, I was an award-winning visual artist, video artist, and performer. My performance career was filled with title roles, sold out performances, and even international travel. Personally, I felt I had always been a good son with a jovial personality that was easy to befriend. I was outgoing, a curious spirit, always smiling, and I always brought out the best in others. I was an out, gay man who had the love and support of my friends and family. I felt un-bashful, unique, and proud of who I was. To capsize it all, I was “ok” being me. So when July 11th came and I was told I was HIV+, I wish I could have said I felt like my “ordinary” self. But, I did not. I did not feel ordinary at all. I felt like a stranger, a freak, and for the first time in my life I felt ashamed of who I was. Everything I had accomplished, everything I had admired in myself washed away that day, and the only things I had left were my diagnosis and an overwhelming feeling of shame. I felt a gamut of feelings from vulnerable and weak to feeling worthless and unlovable. It took 34 years to make something of myself and just one moment to strip it all away.

In reality though, nothing had changed. I was still myself. But, I thought I had become my diagnosis; a condition I had thought of to be taboo, dangerous, wrong, dirty, and disgraceful. Everything I had assumed I “knew” about HIV was all based on perception. These feelings emerged from trauma and from stigma. It took me a solid year to walk through my life again and see who I was. Every day felt like it had its own test,

and with each test came a small victory. Sometimes I felt victorious because I could just get through a day. Sometimes I felt victorious because I could make it through a dance class. Other times, it was in knowing that my students saw me as an instructor rather than some three-eyed monster I had imagined. Some days felt “good” because I had not thought about my diagnosis all day until it came time for me to take my pill. And sometimes, it was just being able to share my story with someone new. During this journey, I saw that talking things out was a major form of coping for me. Each time I was able to share my story it brought great relief because it relieved some emotional weight, or provided me support, or understanding. Sharing my story allowed me to honor whom I was, in all of my vulnerability, as I worked towards overcoming my shame and finding my sense of self again.

Dr. Brené Brown (2010), a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, provides a testament on the importance of creating global connections with others by eradicating shame and establishing empathy towards one another. For the past fifteen years, Brown has dedicated her research towards the study of vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. In her words, “if we’re going to find our way back to each other, vulnerability is going to be that path (Brown, 2012, 19:18).” Brown’s quantitative research has illuminated a deeper understanding of the human psyche and basic human emotional need to connect. In an eloquent explanation of the elements that contribute to shame, she explains, “put shame in a petri dish and it only needs three things to grow – secrecy, silence, and judgment. If you put the same amount of shame into a petri dish and douse it with empathy it can’t survive (Brown, 2012, 18:54).” Reflecting on my own personal journey of accepting my HIV+ diagnosis, I see that I experienced the panic of secrecy, the silence of feeling taboo, and the fear of judgment, which all lead to feelings of disempowerment. Based on my own

experiences, I found logic in the Brown's work, which made me further believe in the importance of dedicating my applied project towards the demystification of what the HIV+ coming out process was like for me. Brown's work fueled my interests in showing that shame, though a challenging element in the coming out process, can be overcome with love, respect, acceptance, and pride. And, by sharing how I found my own sense of empowerment again, I hoped to show other HIV+ individuals that they do not have to feel like they have to live a life of secrecy, or be silent about who they are, or believe they deserve to be judged. I remembered and believed again that we are all people deserving of respect, understanding, love, and empathy.

As I processed my own experiences with my HIV+ diagnosis, I came to see both sides of the story. I saw how ideas related to stigmatization connected my personal story to the larger culture around HIV+ individuals in society. I eventually realized that addressing the stigmatization of HIV+ individuals would be the story for my applied project. However, in order to tell my story, I needed to address the threats of secrecy, silence, and judgment, and encourage others to have more empathy towards others. I believed this could be done through design. Yes, the subject of HIV is a difficult and complex subject to address, both from objective and subjective perspectives, however as I began to find a personal interest in discussing the HIV+ coming out process, I found I could rely on my design experiences and expertise to guide me to the structure to disclose my diagnosis and educate others about the existence of HIV stigma.

As I commonly do in a design project, I get very pragmatic by assessing the needs of a message, processing the needs, customizing a solution, and then working backwards from the end goal to the start date. It is a systematic approach I use to orchestrate my time and energy with predictable outcomes, which is why I relied on this approach when disclosing my HIV+ status. I was very strategic with whom I disclosed to and when I

disclosed. The timing “had to be right,” meaning there had to be ample opportunity to share, disclose, support, and discuss. The objective was not to just selfishly share for my well-being but to figure out how I could support whom ever I disclosed to; after all, I equated disclosing to handing someone a bomb. So, there was no margin for carelessness. Other people’s well-being was of up most importance to me and my sanity was secondary. Every time I disclosed, I usually followed a general script that contained its own natural rhythms and timing of how to say this, when to say that, and what information was shared. I was methodical in my approach and delivery because it was the only way I could find my strength while taking responsibility for other people’s well-being in guiding them through the disclosing process. I began to realize during my disclosing process that as much as I needed others to be strong for me, I needed to be strong for them. I found this to be a very interesting negotiation and a critical one in that it was important to me to create scaffoldings of support for all parties involved.

Disclosing one’s HIV+ status is a very personal matter that everyone approaches differently. This is something I came to understand through round table discussions with other HIV+ individuals in support groups I attended throughout the year. I heard many perspectives on the subject from individuals as young as 21 to as old as 54, of various social economical backgrounds, those who have been diagnosed for years and a rare few who were newly diagnosed like me, from both straight and gay people, married or single, and those with and without children. Although my attendance was rather regular throughout the year, the crowd of participants constantly changed, so I was constantly hearing from different perspectives. Sometimes I found community with others, and sometimes I did not. It is during this period that I realized three things. The first was that in a large metropolitan such as Phoenix, rarely did I ever come across another thirty-year old, newly diagnosed person. Statistically, they are out there. However, I

never encountered them, which, unfortunately contributed to an already existing feeling of isolation and lack of identity. Another realization was how reminiscent accepting one's HIV diagnosis was to the coming out process. This was something that I both felt and saw in others. Recurring phrases surfaced such as *I can't tell any one*, or *what would my family think*, or *no one needs to know, it's my business*. I kept hearing these statements of shame and disempowerment, which were both disheartening and intriguing at the same time. As a gay man, I could not help but reflect on a time when I was questioning my sexuality and how emotionally challenging it was to accept myself. My last realization, out of all these round table discussions, showed me just how multifaceted the subject of HIV and disclosing could be. As I approached each of my own personal hurdles, I would take a moment to breathe, reflect, and take note of which hurdles were most challenging to me. It is during this personal voyage that I began to collect the key concepts and themes of my story that I would then riddle within the storyline of my applied project through visual and aural motifs, metaphoric objects, subtext, and plot points.

Eventually, when it came time for me to propose the concept of my MFA applied project to my committee members, it required me to disclose my status to them. I felt I had all the necessary scaffolding prepared for myself, for them, and for my proposal to discuss the concept. By this point, I had spent the past academic school year processing my diagnosis with myself, overcoming my own stigma, finding support, and creating new work that abstractly reflected my journey. When I proposed that the subject of my applied project would be the interpretation of my own HIV+ coming out story, it was met with compassion and open mindedness. At this point, I did not know how much I would disclose in my applied project, but I knew if I wanted to authentically address the subject of HIV stigma and shame, then I would need to come out publicly with my status. At this

moment of disclosing, my committee advised me on a range of approaches, such as using abstraction, to interpret such a private medical condition. They readily realized that the public disclosing of one's HIV+ status is a personal choice that one should not jump into without contemplating the personal consequences. I understood this as well. Although I may have come to terms accepting my diagnosis on a personal level, having been newly diagnosed only a few months prior, I still felt anxious about publically disclosing my status, which brought me back to the purpose of my applied project.

I took my committee's suggestion into consideration, knowing they would provide their support in any direction I chose. When I returned to my original intention for the work, I contemplated several questions: *Why should I be afraid to share my story? Why should I have to be secretive of my life or who I was? Why should I worry about judgment?* From these questions I came to the following conclusion, *I should just be able to be proud of who I am, unashamed, like I always was.* This realization motivated me to move forward in designing a project that was bold, inviting, clear, and authentic.

I know many people would say creating an autobiographical dance theatre work about coming to terms with one's own HIV+ status and coping with self stigma may seem like an important cathartic experience. I will not deny the process has been cathartic for me, but what is important for me to state is that this project is meant for others. It was meant to educate, it was meant to inspire, it was meant to recognize, and it was meant to contribute to the discourse on HIV stigma, and show others, specifically those inside the HIV+ community, that there is nothing to be ashamed about once you find your love for yourself – because loving yourself really is one of the greatest loves of all.

Artistic Influences

Throughout the creation of this work, I studied several influential multimedia artists known for their non-linear approach to storytelling design that often incorporate a potpourri of disciplines such as text, customized set designs, video art, acting and live musical accompaniment. My investigation led me to Miguel Gutierrez, Bill T. Jones, Joe Goode, and Laurie Anderson.

I was particularly inspired by the work of Brooklyn-based artist Miguel Gutierrez, whose art focuses on endurance-based performance art, “noise music,” social and religious ritual, and references to various histories of spectacle including Broadway and queer club performances. Gutierrez is often commissioned to create work that uses media in a simple “low tech” approach as exemplified in his work *myendlesslove* (Steinhauer, 2014) where Gutierrez explores the use of audio playback with a microphone, track pad, and amp. He uses low-tech devices as an expressive means to reinterpret the idea of identity both in the present and virtual world. I find this play with reality and time to be an effective way to subdivide a storyline and reconstruct the aural information that is transmitted to an audience, especially through the use of simple and visible technology. I appreciate his aesthetic of exposed technology in theatrical performances because it dissolves the fourth wall from a production standpoint. Like Gutierrez, I was interested in being transparent with the audience and for them to see me engage physically with the technology in the space. Commonly in theatre there is an aesthetic interest in cloaking the use of mediated devices so that the representation of a fabricated reality is not interrupted, and the audience’s perception of being immersed into a new reality is untainted. This interruptive technique of exposing the hardware in mediated performances, allows the audience to select what they wish to see as opposed

to directing an audience's experience in an immersive fabricated theatrical world (Kattenbelt, 2006).

Another important artist I studied was Bill T. Jones and his work *Chapel/Chapter* (Howard, 2007) that featured a two-column grid of symmetrical boxes laid out across the floor. The grid, much like a structural grid used in graphic design, divided the floor into different compartments of various sizes, which influenced the choreography and staging by creating localized scenes. Through the use of the grid Jones was able to shift from one storyline to another by visually cutting the stage into subdivisions. I found this “designed” approach to deconstructing the stage to be very effective in transforming the stage into multiple scenarios that supported the narrative.

After I had spent time analyzing these interdisciplinary artists and researching innovative ways to design the media in my applied project, I began to look at the content and tone of the story. Once I had settled on the subject of my story, I became very interested in autobiographical stories, which led me to analyzing numerous TED Talk presentations, specifically focused on the coming out process, shame, and empowerment. Standout talks that had a lasting impression on me included: Geena Rocero's *Why I Must Come Out* (2015), a transgendered autobiographical coming of age story; Monica Lewinsky's *The Price of Shame* (2015), a reflective look at our online culture of humiliation; Ash Beckham's *We're All Hiding Something. Let's Find the Courage to Open Up* (2014), an empathetic talk on stepping out of the closet of our own hardships; and Shereen El Feki's *HIV – How to Fight An Epidemic of Bad Laws* (2012), a critical look at stigmatizing HIV laws. The common thematic thread amongst these speakers was their connection to social justice and shame. Through each of these speakers, I became familiar with the use of personal anecdotes to engage with the audience, make a point, or paint a picture of their social issue. They showed me various

ways to tailor a message. I appreciated their humble tones and charming, clear, and often poetic-like nontheatrical storytelling. I found these talks to be most effective because of the pacing of their stories. This pacing created a certain rhythm that I also identified in standup comedy.

I view certain standup comedians such as John Stewart, Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho as social activists. These comedians base their comedy acts on critiquing the subjects of discrimination, oppression, stereotypes, social taboos, and political incorrectness. They appear to mock their own cultural stereotypes while actually criticizing the social constructs that create these stereotypes. Familiarizing myself with these “storytellers” was critical in the development of my narrative, as it showed me that humor was a tool that could provoke empathy and comic relief. Assessing the similarities and differences between both the TED Talk presentations and standup routines was critical in the construction of the narrative for my applied project, especially since public speaking was an art form I had not incorporated in my creative work prior to this project.

Looking back, this collection of visual, interdisciplinary, and spoken word artists significantly influenced the *design* of my applied project. However, it was not until I began the rehearsal process that I began to see the depth of my work and understood how it touched on issues of social justice. It was not until the end of my rehearsal process when I could assess the work in its entirety that I began to see how the work fit into the discourse of HIV within the arts. The research involving artists living with or creating work about HIV/AIDS emerged late in the development of my applied project. The artists I researched included Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sean Dorsey, and other artists registered in the Visual AIDS database. These artists worked within illustration, sculpture, and dance. The work that I compared most critically to my autobiographical dance theatre project, that possessed many of the same production

qualities (i.e. video, spoken word, theatricality), was Bill T. Jones' iconic multimedia dance production, *Still/Here* (Grubin & Markowitz, 1997).

Both a staged production and documentary film, *Still/Here* is a multimedia dance theatre work based on interviews with terminally ill individuals (Grubin & Markowitz, 1997). In a course of a year, Jones traveled throughout the US conducting week-long creative workshops and collecting stories from these individuals. Jones lead participants in a series of creative exercises that included creating abstract gestures, drawing their life, describing their last day living, and sharing their inner thoughts about their diagnosis. The testimonies and movement vocabulary created in these workshops were then transposed to Jones' company and staged in an evening length multimedia dance work that featured video documentation from these workshops.

There are many qualities I have always admired in *Still/Here* from when I was first introduced to it during my undergraduate years. Now, as I look at my work along side of Jones's work, I see similarities between our content and methodologies. For example, I see similarities in our interests touching on themes of life and death, struggle and perseverance, and compassion for others. In my creative process, I too am interested in developing movement vocabulary from abstract gesturing. Watching workshop participants express their stories through simple gestures sequences, provided insight into how small movements can convey profound meaning. Overall what I found to be moving in observing Jones's creative process and the stories each participant shared, were the authenticities in their words and gestures, and a reoccurring interest to help others through their struggle. This resonated deeply in me as I watched these testimonies with my own chronic condition. I was reminded of the personal anecdotes I encountered earlier in my artistic research on storytelling, and here I was encountering these nuances again. Although I consider myself to be a conceptual artist, I appreciated

the pairing of abstract gesturing with spoken word to create clear and compelling storytelling.

Although my knowledge of artists working with stigma staggered into my process in waves, each wave significantly contributed to the development of my project. As my project evolved, so did my questions of inquiry. Before knowing my story, my research questions included: How can the augmentation of space effect audience and conceptual perception? How does one balance the hierarchy of visual information in mediated performances? How can media and movement integrate as one? How can we engage and connect with audiences in a unique theatrical experience? The following chapters take these questions of inquiry and filter them through a design lens in conceptualizing, creating, and analyzing my applied project.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONCEPT: CHOREOGRAPHING AS A GRAPHIC DESIGNER

"Practice safe design: Use a concept."

– Petrola Vrontikis, Graphic Designer

3

Prior to my arrival to Arizona, I was an active interdisciplinary artist for over a decade working with mixed mediums ranging from painting to motion graphics to dance. The underlying string that connected all these interests was my passion for visual communication or, in other words, communicating through imagery. My formal training began at Indiana University where I focused on print design and video art. During that time, I began to develop my design sensibilities in crafting the visual presentation, perception, and interpretation of information – also known as information design. My training was fundamentally grounded in what is referred to in graphic design as the Principles of Design. Listed below are the Principles of Design, as defined by the Education Department at the J. Paul Getty Museum (The Paul Getty Museum, 2011).

Principles of Design

3



Balance is the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space. If the design was a scale, these elements should be balanced to make a design feel stable. In symmetrical balance, the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side; in asymmetrical balance, the sides are different but still look balanced. In radial balance, the elements are arranged around a central point and may be similar.



Emphasis is the part of the design that catches the viewer's attention. Usually the artist will make one area stand out by contrasting it with other areas. The area could be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.



Movement is the path the viewer's eye takes through the work of art, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, edges, shape, and color within the work of art.



Pattern is the repetition of an object or symbol all over the picture plane.



Repetition works with pattern to make the work of art seem active. The repetition of elements of design creates unity within the work of art.



Proportion is the feeling of unity created when all parts (sizes, amounts, or number) relate well with each other. When drawing the human figure, proportion can refer to the size of the head compared to the rest of the body.



Rhythm is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement. It creates a mood like music or dancing. To keep rhythm exciting and active, variety is essential.



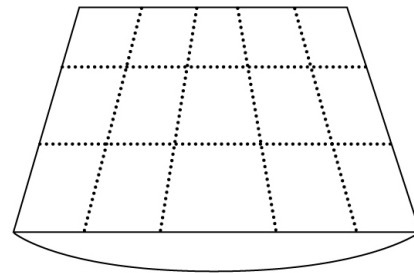
Variety is the use of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and to guide the viewer's eye through and around the work of art.



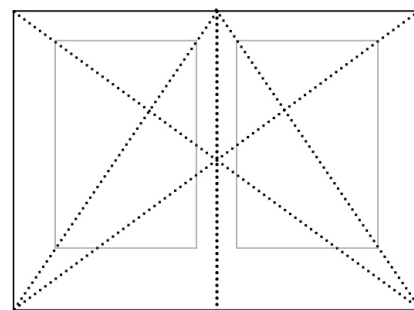
Unity is the feeling of harmony between all parts of the work of art, which creates a sense of completeness.

After my undergraduate studies, I continued to fortify my understanding of these principles in Washington, DC where I lived a successful career as an art director and graphic designer for prestigious organizations such as the Tony Award-Winning Shakespeare Theater Company and The J. F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It was during that time that I refined my expertise in visual communication and began my practice of analyzing the message. In graphic design, in order to effectively communicate a message it is important for a designer to assess, process, and customize a solution that successfully meets the needs of the design project. As the lead designer for these non-profit organizations, my responsibilities included not only the visual representation of these organizations but also the monitoring of all written communication. This entailed consulting with each department and program belonging to these organizations and advising the correct language for their desired target audience. It is a process that looks at rhetoric, semantics, tone, poetic imagery, and poignancy. My assessment fine-tunes my ability to articulate and tailor messaging into numerous modes of communication. The development of a critical understanding for design not only proved to be beneficial in a career in graphic design but also in dance.

Proscenium Layout



Book Layout



Arriving at ASU, I continued my exploration of intersecting media with performance. My foundation in the Principles of Design created the lens through which I viewed and analyzed all works of art. Since visual communication is the communication of ideas and information through the use of imagery, I viewed dance through a design lens. Many of the choreographic elements (shape, space, timing, dynamics, etc.) employ a design vocabulary in their definitions such as scale, symmetry, asymmetry, rhythm, and space. In fact, in my opinion, the proscenium could be viewed as a two-dimensional canvas with its own invisible grid (i.e. upstage, down stage, center stage, stage left, stage right, etc.), very much like how a grid exists in a book's page layout. Grids, in fact, are the architecture scaffolding that organizationally establishes the visual hierarchy in any design. Sometimes they are notable such as in an Excel spreadsheet and at other times they are invisible such as a Fibonacci Spiral. So, in my mind, I categorized dance within the field of visual communication and therefore approached it with the same design sensibilities as I would a blank sheet of paper.

The Concept

Like any great design project, everything begins with a concept. I knew that the content of my applied project was going to be about my personal journey with HIV and coping with HIV stigma. However, I wanted a metaphor that served as the central concept for my work. Little did I know that this metaphor would emerge from the most unexpected of places – a birthday.

HIV medication is expensive. In 2006, a national survey estimated the average monthly cost of HIV medication to be around \$2,100 (DeNoon, 2006). In the past decade, many national HIV organizations and charities, such as the Ryan White Foundation, have offered financial support for those in need. Additionally, every state has their own Medicaid agency that can offer further support for residents of a certain

income for acute or long-term services. The Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) is Arizona's Medicaid agency. Founded in 1982, one of the services AHCCCS provides is coverage of HIV medication and medical appointments. As a low-income graduate student, I fall within this coverage. At the start of my enrollment, a client is paired with an HIV case manager who assists them in collecting and filing the proper paperwork to establish and maintain their coverage. To maintain long-term coverage, AHCCCS requires an annual renewal. This annual renewal is known in the system as a client's "birthday." At first, I found this term to be very strange. However, I learned that the term comes from the need for case managers to be able to speak openly and discreetly to their clients about their renewal date. "Birthday," therefore, was a safe word.

As stated before, I found the term to be very peculiar because of the dual meaning the word "birthday" now possessed. "Birthday" was a term I always associated with someone's biological date of birth. It was a sentimental occasion that I enthusiastically celebrated openly and with friends and family. Yet, for those within AHCCCS coverage, the date was recognized in a completely opposite manner. For me, I could not help but think about my AHCCCS birthday as anything more than a lonely party for one. As I became accustomed to this new term, I soon realized that this dichotomy served as my creative inspiration. Considering the dual interpretations behind the word "birthday," I found great flexibility to explore many sub-themes relative to my thoughts on HIV such as identify, life and death, destiny, stigma, secrets, spectacles, discretion, audience, beginning, ends, renewal, morality, and a plethora of metaphoric symbols.

The concept of my applied project galvanized when I heard the title soundtrack, *It's My Party* (Gore, 1965). As I was scavenging through various thematic birthday and party songs for source material, it spoke to me, "It's my party and I'll cry if I want to."

The statement said it all. I was dumbfounded that after so many years of hearing Lesley Gore's 1964 hit song, I never heard how emotionally conflicting the song really was. That epiphany had become the "ah-ha" moment I needed to come to terms with my concept. And so, I began my journey in creating *It's My Party*, a multimedia dance theatre production.

The Prospectus

In the life span of my applied project, it underwent several significant evolutions. There are, however, certain elements from its initial inception that manifested in the final production. Below is an excerpt from my prospectus that identifies my initial goals and points of inquiry. To note, this document was written in early May 2015, before I had determined my applied project would focus on my HIV+ diagnosis. This was also before rehearsals had begun or media was created.

As a reflection of my experiences in interdisciplinary art, my proposed graduate applied project will take the form of a multimedia choreographic work that employs the use of technology (e.g., video, live capture and playback, projection) within a dance performance. The performance will be held January 22-24, 2016 in the Nelson Fine Arts Center studio 122. My creative research will focus on developing abstract storytelling, stimulating the "user experience" (or audience experience), and exploring design elements involved in composing intermediated performances. I envision the work being created with a small cast of two to four performers.

I am interested in abstract storytelling that touches on human nature, interpersonal relationships, identity, sexuality and gender, and social norms. The stories for this project will be inspired by my own personal history, life experiences, or social observations. Specifically, I will explore the transmission and mis-transmission of information and ideas behind the phrase "there are two sides to every story." Contrasting concepts I will contemplate are interpretations of life and death, acceptance and stigma, oppression and free will, infatuation and love, and fantasy and reality.

As I create the story, I want to bring specific attention to developing relations between the performers and media and the acknowledgement of the media's existence as an additional performer. The performers will play an interactive role with the media, whether through choreography, composition, or the handling/operating of the technology. This reflects my interests in object theatre and will give the work cohesion. The technological concepts I plan to investigate are realtime video capture and playback, video projection mapping, vocal recording and playback, and interaction with low-tech hand-held devices (i.e. radio player, Walkmans, floor fans, or flashlights). Along with the media, the

performers will also play an active role manipulating the set design – a movable wall.

With attention to the “user experience,” I am conscious of how the audience’s seating and the staging of the work affects the audience’s perception. Therefore, as the work develops I will explore manipulating the audience’s viewing experience and their sight lines. For the time being, there are two possible seating options for the work. One arrangement will consist of a thrust configuration set along the south side of the FAC 122 studio, facing the north white wall. The other seating arrangement will forego chairs (or provide very limited seating for those in need of seating) and allow audience members to freely roam in the space during the performance. One of the most significant elements that will effect audience perception is the positioning of the moveable wall. I am intrigued with the idea of limiting or denying the viewers’ perspectives and provoking their senses. This, I believe, will be germane to my concept and, again, contribute to a unique theatrical experience. (Alvarez, 2015)

There are several key goals that were stated in my prospectus that I have held onto throughout my entire applied project journey. Based on my prospectus, here were my goals: to incorporate media, work cross-disciplinarily, and create a unique theatrical environment. Acknowledging the goals of a design project is the first step in my creative process, which is based on problem solving, which is reflective of my graphic design training. Problem solving, for me, is broken down into four stages: determining the goals of the project, assessing the message, processing the message, and then customizing the message to meet the goals of the project. The following is a breakdown of each goal and its relevance to my applied project.

The Project Objectives

As a video artist, it was important to me that my applied project incorporated the use of media. Theatre has evolved as a composite art form of many different disciplines. Traditionally, theatre was made up of distinct elements – poetry, dance, and music (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006). Today it incorporates new contemporary technological aesthetics and techniques that have only been available since the dawn of the digital era. This evolution of theatre, known as *intermediality*, is now a common reflection of twentieth-century performance artists who push the proscenium boundaries into new

phenomenological experiences for audiences through their cross-disciplinary artistic point-of-views. My interest in incorporating video into my applied project was to add depth and create an environment for an ephemeral art form. Originally I had envisioned the use of handheld projectors and the creation of a customized moveable wall that would be used as a projection surface. Although these elements would have been fascinating to experiment with, my priorities shifted as the story began to unfold. I was no longer strictly viewing the use of media as the primary component of my applied project as I had detailed in my prospectus. Instead, I saw media as one complimenting element amongst many in the gestalt of the production. As an artistic director, it was important that I maintain a balance amongst all the production elements, which was an appropriate mindset for my second goal – to truly be interdisciplinary.

Along with media I was interested in incorporating acting, spoken word, scenic design, costume design, and live music into the production, which reflects my interests in information design and playing with multiple means of communication. The existence of interdisciplinary art could be seen in the eighteenth and nineteenth artists who viewed their work through multiple perspectives such as artist-scientist Leonardo di Vinci, poet-printmaker-mystic William Blake, and poet-painter-designer-socialist William Morris. These eclectic artists pioneered their fields through cross-disciplinary modes of thinking and expression with the intention to advance the viewer's appreciation of art to a deeper and more sophisticated level (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006). I was eager to broaden my artistic perspective through cross-disciplinary modes of thinking and doing. By learning about other performing art disciplines, I developed a deeper understanding of how to craft engaging stories. This led me to be to my third goal – to challenge my performance abilities.

Since I had cast myself as the principal in this work, it was important that I continue to challenge my performance capabilities as a performer and interdisciplinary artist. For example, this was the first time I performed monologues and acted in scenes with another actor. Specifically, I was interested in using a microphone not just as a means to amplify the spoken parts of the work but also as an exposed use of technology. Commonly in theatre there is an aesthetic interest in cloaking the use of mediated devices so that the representation of a fabricated reality is not interrupted and the audience's perception of being immersed into a new reality is untainted. This interruptive technique of exposing the hardware in mediated performances allows the audience to select what they wish to see as opposed to directing an audience's experience in an immersive fabricated theatrical world (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006). I had a clear interest in being transparent with the audience and for them to see me engage physically with the technology in the space. An example of this was through the use of a microphone and a cassette tape player.

Lastly, the presentation of the work needed to be conducive to support the use of video. Originally I had envisioned the production to be staged in a proscenium setting, where I could use the cyclorama for projection work. However, I was assigned to a large dance studio in the Nelson Fine Arts Center, which forced me to consider an alternative layout for the production. My immediate concern was how could I support the use of video in the space. My creative gears began to churn and I started to accept the unique architectural features of the space such as the high two-story ceiling, large projectable wall, wide studio floor, and a featured balcony. Accepting the restrictions of the space helped me see the potential that existed inherently in the space. My final decision was to settle on a thrust-like seating configuration. This arrangement was similar to the layout featured in the work of Bill T. Jones, *Chapel/Chapter* (Howard, 2007). I was inspired by

Jones' approach to the deconstruction of space, which inspired me to explore such various ways to manipulate the stage area and address the interpretation of multiple story lines. The final outcome was a thrust configured seating arrangement inside of three surrounding projectable walls. Although this had not been my originally envisioned "dream space," I confess that I cannot see the work being presented in a proscenium configuration. This just goes to show that certain misfortunes can actually turn out to be fortunate solutions, if only one is able to do a little problem solving.

"Mind-Body Connection"

Typically, when I determine the goals of a design project, I do not have much of a personal connection to the project; I strictly view the work from a formal lens. This is largely due to the fact that I am usually approached by an outside source with a design request. Therefore, my relation to the client and project is easily preserved as an objective one. However, in my performance work, I see that it is inescapable for me not to have a personal connection since the concept almost always is derived from a personal thought, experience, or observation. Therefore, my subjectivity is intricately woven into the DNA of my performance work. I now see that this is something uniquely different between my approach to print design and my approach to performance. In a choreographic work of my own creation, the "client" and "concept" are two of the same – they are both me.

As I took hold of the concept, my HIV story, and brought it into the incubator of my mind, it seeped into everything. This is the moment when my applied project came to life or, as I like to imagine, my applied project had a "mind-body connection." If my prospectus were the body, then my concept was the spirit that ran through it. The moment I had my "ah-ha" and knew what story I was going to tell, everything came into focus. My proposal questions, which emerged from an objective and pragmatic place, all

adjusted according to my concept. I was then able to move forward with my creative process in assessing the message (or narrative of the work), processing it, and then customizing a solution. Assessing and processing the message took me three months to complete. It required me to enter into a very personal, contemplative state where I could fully come to terms with my diagnosis, process what the important themes in my coming out story were, and determine how open I felt I could be with sharing my own personal story. During this period I discovered the largest goal of my applied project—how to overcome stigma through design. When I returned from my summer break, I began my rehearsal and design process, also known to me as a customizing of the solution. Now that I had determined the content of my applied project was based on my own personal story, my proposal questions evolved to be reflective of my concept.

Reframed Questions of Inquiry:

Reframed: How do you make the subject of HIV tangible and assessable?

Formerly: How do you balance the hierarchy of visual information in mediated performances?

Reframed: How do you convey transformation and empowerment in performance?

Formerly: How can media and movement integrate as one?

Reframed: How do you connect with audiences?

Formerly: How can the augmentation of space affect audience and conceptual perception?

Reframed: How do you “talk” about something and not “preach” about it?

Formerly: How can we engage and connect with audiences in a unique theatrical experience?

Assessing the Message

A questioning period is a common practice when I approach any design project. It is the moment I step into many different shoes and view the significance of the project from multiple perspectives to consider how each individual might interpret the message. If I were a copywriter, this would be the moment I was mindful of the tone within a text. If I were a content editor, I would consider what keywords, headlines, or ideas might pop out. As a graphic designer, I was mindful of the point-of-entry, the moment and place when a reader first engages with the message. What does it look like? What does it sound like? What is inviting about it? These are a few of the questions I consider when I think about the moment a viewer engages with design.

Assessing my new questions of inquiry led me to one universal question, *what is important about HIV stigma for people to know?* I found all my answers were rooted in my initial sense of lost identity, lack of community, and my own self-stigmatization. To me, the purpose of my applied project was to bring light to a misperceived marginalized group that is overshadowed by a dark history of tragedy. Much of our understanding of what HIV looks like today comes from medical journals and statistics. These are valid ways to keep others updated on the latest information, however, they do not provide insight into the human condition of being an HIV+ person today.

Motivated to bring new perspective on the subject of HIV stigma, HIV activist David Gere (2013) held a TED Talk in 2013 titled *Remove the Negative from HIV+*. Gere sheds light on the importance of combating HIV stigma through identity. In an insightful talk, Gere addresses the connection and disconnection we achieve through our ability to identify others. Gere is very familiar with the powerful role art can play in creating identity through crisis. In his award-winning book, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*, Gere (Gene, 2004) breaks new

ground on the social and political investigation of choreography during the AIDS epidemic. As an established dance critic and former performer, Gere's expertise in art and queer studies aided his research into the interplay between AIDS and corporeality, in particular to gay men in the US during the late twentieth century. His observations of over a dozen performances that explored themes of eroticism, fetishism, camp humor, death, irony, and mourning have helped shed light on the complex subject of HIV/AIDS (Lehikoinen, 2006). From his extensive research in how choreography documented the emotional, cultural, political, and psychological progression of the AIDS epidemic, Gere concluded that art can construct and shape social perception. This phenomenon led to the creation of, *Through Positive Eyes*, an advocacy project that asks individuals around the world living with HIV to represent themselves through photography. Thus far, *Through Positive Eyes* has collaborated with individuals in six countries and on five continents. By rebranding the stigma of HIV with a contemporary face, Gere has been commended for empowering his subjects rather than representing them as objects of pity in featured exhibitions, short films, and books. This is what I believed was the most relevant to my work – the need to have a human voice and a human soul woven into the storyline. Therefore, this rationale led me to the belief that in order to bring identity to the story, the audience had to know who the protagonist was. In other words, I had to show an honest presentation of myself.

To achieve this, I invested in developing characters, sharing personal facts, recognizing my family, and including trademark interests that pointed to who I am. It was my intention to show that I am not just another statistic but that I am a three-dimensional person. I am just like everyone else: I have a family, I am a son, I am a brother, I am a tio, I am energetic, I am creative, and I am me. This intention swayed me from a strictly formal approach to my concept towards a clear dialogue about who I am

and how I construct my identity. At one point, one of my dancers asked me, “what do you hope the audience will walk away with after they see your show?” to which I answered, “I hope they walk away feeling like they know someone with HIV. And not just know someone with HIV, but understand that person with HIV.”

As I hypothesized who might be in the audience, I took into consideration that the work would be presented on a university campus. Therefore, I assumed the audience would primarily consist of college students and adults in their early 20s, and I then speculated the perspectives from which they may approach the work. From that I created a list of assumptions that informed how I processed and presented the information. My assumptions were as follows:

Profile of the Audience

It is likely that students in the audience:

- have never met someone or knowingly met who is HIV+;
- feel awkward or uncomfortable about the subject of HIV;
- have a negative or sad association to the word “HIV;”
- think HIV exists anywhere but where they are (at ASU, AZ, PHX, on campus, etc.);
- have a negative visual image of what an HIV+ person looks like;
- are not aware of their own stigma towards the subject of HIV or the HIV community.

These are the assumptions that I gathered from the stories I heard from others, interactions I had observed, media coverage, and personal experiences. These assumptions were the parameters that defined how I navigated the unveiling of my story. My assumptions about the audience informed my next step in processing the message. During this stage I determined the hierarchy of information and ultimate purpose of the message.

Processing the Message

My processing of the message is a progression of deconstruction and reconstruction. It consists of running the message through many conscious and subconscious filters in order to get to the essence of the message. *What are the big takeaways?* Or, *what is most pertinent to the message?* This is when I began to determine that the message needed to be inviting, engaging, stimulating, and to retain its integrity.

Questions that commonly lead my investigation in understanding the message in a design project are: *who is the target audience, what are the thematic visual clues that can support the message, and what is the hierarchy of information?* My consciousness of hierarchy is based on my approach to text within a print design project. In the crafting of information design, the division and restructuring of information in a visual hierarchy that is intuitive for a reader is of upmost importance. A classic approach to this structuring can be seen in headlines that are bolded in large font, accompanied by sub headlines that fall beneath those main headlines in medium sized, italicized fonts, and then lastly the body of the article in the small legible font size. These are simple tactics used in information design to create visual hierarchy. In the conceptualization of the story in, *It's My Party*, I envisioned the progression of the storyline in a very similar manner. In a way, I first viewed the dance as a book.

As I began to gather the content of my story, I started to string the signature moments, feelings, and questions together into a narrative, which eventually synthesized into the form of a “book on tape,” a twenty-minute audio recording of me walking through the structure of the work with song soundtracks, voice commentary, sound effects, and improvised dialogue. In conventional theatre this “book on tape” was the equivalent to a table reading of a script that occurs before the actors begin rehearsing in

the studio. Table readings are insightful opportunities for the director and creative team to become acquainted with the storyline and to model the shape, tone, theatrical pacing, and energy of the show. Considering that the nature of my work encompassed both movement and devised sections of spoken word, I focused on a voice over commentary of me narrating what each section of the work consisted of scene by scene. This audio recording proved to be a huge asset in the start of my rehearsal process. It not only provided clarity of the vision, it helped determine the pacing of the work from dynamics, to mood shifts, to resolution.

As I processed my story, the dichotomy of my concept, and anticipated what understanding viewers would bring to the piece, I created a list of key themes to address. Processing what these key ideas and themes meant to me informed how I customized the message.

Key Themes

- Unexpected “birthdays” – 4th of July, The Big Bang, Jesus, stars,
- HIV is not only difficult for the diagnosed but also for their loved ones
- There is judgment in asking, “how did you get it”
- You are not your disease
- “Everything happens for a reason”
- “When given lemons make lemonade”
- Coming out as HIV+ is like the gay coming out process
- Shame is debilitating
- You have to forgive, accept, and love yourself
- Find what gives you strength.
- Find your “ok-ness”

Customizing the Message

Considering the double entendre that is behind in the word “birthdays,” both as a public celebration of life and an administrative term in HIV care, I recognized that the storyline needed to balance these two concepts. This balance provided contrast between a jovial celebration and a mature subject. In theatre, one could perceive this as a balance between comedy and tragedy. The questions I needed to resolve were: *how do I make these two terms relative?* and *how do I lead the audience from one concept to another in a thematic manner?* As identified earlier, my assumption was that the subject of HIV not only would be foreign to most audience members but might also be an uncomfortable subject for them. I felt so much of the perception of HIV/AIDS is rooted in tragedy that I wanted to approach the work from another angle. So, I approached things from a comedic direction.

I have always been a fan of comedy as a tool in storytelling, not just for its entertainment value but also for its ability to assist the pacing of a story to arrive at a dramatic point or to defuse a tragic reveal. Already in my choreographic work at ASU, I had begun to investigate the use of comedy as a choreographic tool. When brought into my performance work, I usually approached comedy as a means to address subtle undertones in a concept and when approaching work that addressed heavy concepts such as obsession, jealousy, and unrequited love. It is a little difficult to ask, *how can I make HIV funny?* That was never my interest or intention. Instead, I was interested in the use of comedy as a means to engage with the audience, win their trust, address unexpected topics, and comfort their awkwardness. I have admired this in the work of standup comedians. I have always been impressed with comedians’ abilities to manage audience’s understanding by addressing heated political topics in a clear, neutralized, and articulate

manner. This led me to studying several standup comedians, which proved to be beneficial in seeing how comedy can lead to transformation or stigma.

One evening I sat down with friends to watch a recording of Eddie Murphy's 1983 HBO debut standup routine *Delirious* (Murphy, 1983). The last time I had seen this routine was decades ago, so I was curious to re-experience the talent that jump-started his career. In his opening segment, Murphy laid down his house rules. First rule, "no faggots can check out his ass" (Murphy, 1983, 4:09). This was met with laughter. He then proceeded to do an impression of gay men. In his next segment, he then warned the audience to "be careful of the gays because they have the AIDS." From there, he began to explain to the audience how "if your girlfriend kisses her gay friend on the lips, then she has AIDS" (Murphy, 1983, 8:27). This was met with laughter; however in the room I sat, this was met with silence. I bring up this example to demonstrate how comedy can misinform and embed stigma into the minds of an audience.

In contrast to this, humor can be empowering and transformative for audience, such as in the work of Margaret Cho who commonly addresses social taboos in her comedy acts. As a Korean American woman, a large portion of Margaret Cho's standup routine is based on her identity as a first-generation Korean American. Her comedic approach usually consists of small anecdotes rooted in her personal history. Typically, her stories begin as casual narratives describing a common scenario that eventually transform into peculiar commentaries of that scene. Routinely she concludes her storytelling with a punch line that either juxtaposes the scene or reveals her true opinion. As a child of immigrant parents, much of Cho's perspective on life is seated within her position as a minority or her challenges of being a woman in a dominating white male industry. By addressing her own disadvantaged social status as a minority, Cho begins to bring empowerment to her position by critiquing the social pressures and opposition

that challenge her identity. This is addressed in her 2002 show, *Notorious C.H.O.* (Cho, 2002), where she speaks about how as a minority it is not expected that she would have self-esteem. She furthers her commentary to include, “if you are a woman, if you are person of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, if you are a person of size, a person of intelligence, a person of integrity, then you are considered a minority in this world” (Cho, 2002, 1:22:03). She concludes her segment on self-love by saying,

When you don't have self esteem you will hesitate before you do anything in your life, you will hesitate to go for the job you really want to go for, you will hesitate to ask for a raise, you will hesitate to call yourself an American, you will hesitate to report a rape, you will hesitate to defend yourself when you are discriminated against because of your race, your sexuality, you size, your gender, you will hesitate to vote, you will hesitate to dream. For us, to have self-esteem is truly an act of revolution, and our revolution is long over due (Cho, 2002, 1:23:45).

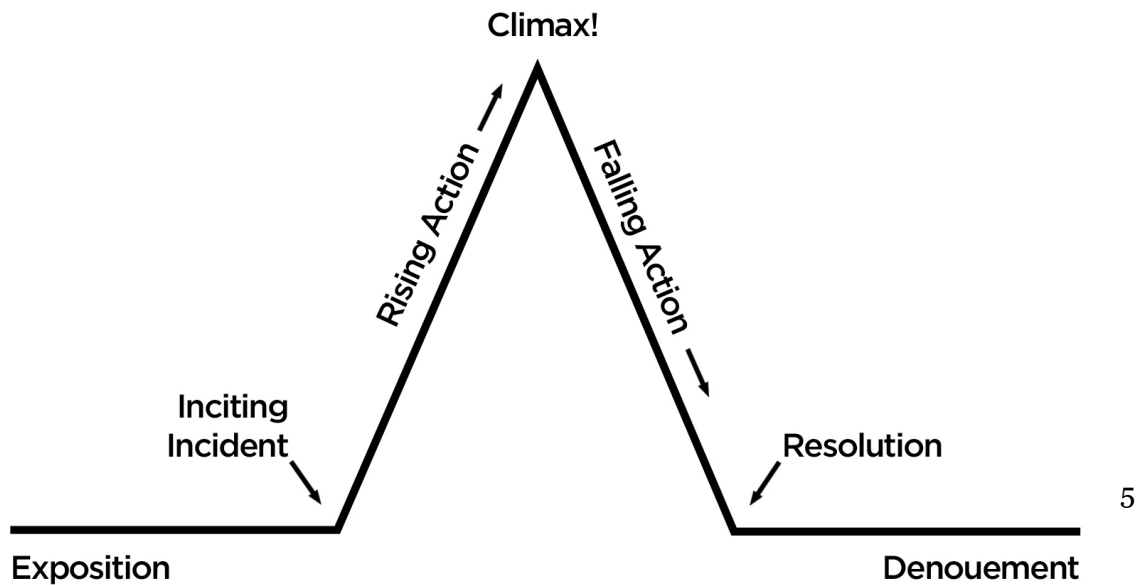
I find Cho's motivational speech to be empowering and moving. Out of context, if this speech were delivered to an audience that she had not already developed a rapport with through her storytelling, the listeners might not have been as prepared or as open to listening to her words on self-love. Through her words, she brings respect and empowerment to the LGBT community and other minorities by recognizing their identity in American society. This tone is very different than that of Eddie Murphy, who has since apologized for his insensitive and discriminative routine (Rubin, 1996). For audiences, Cho (2002) begins to paint a new supportive picture for minorities through her routine, in which she ends her segment by encouraging audiences to, “love your selves without reservations and love each other without restraint... unless you're into leather. Then by all means, use restraints” (Cho, 2002, 1:24:53). This use of humor at the pinnacle of her sentimental segment falls within her comedic pacing of leading audiences into a thought-provoking message that is punctuated at the end with a laugh.

I found Cho's approach to serious subjects to be very effective in first making an audience comfortable and then inviting them into a story. Once trust is won over, a

controversial topic can then be introduced in a neutralized manner to a more open-minded audience. I noted this betwixt moment to be a ripe moment for transformation, which in Cho's work is almost always rewarded with a comedic statement that usually capsulated the audiences' new perception in an eloquent and intellectual way. I modeled the pacing of the narrative in *It's My Party* off of Cho's approach to comedy and how comedy could transform audiences. Understanding rhythm was very important in customizing my message and setting the structure that my narrative followed.

In a typical dramatic story structure, the progression of the story can be divided into several parts: the inciting moment, exposition, rising action, climax/turning point, falling action, and resolution/denouement. Gustav Freytag (1863) created this structure, known as a structure of tragedy. It has been proven to exist in great classical literature such as in Greek tragedies and the works of William Shakespeare. This structure is referred to as Freytag's Pyramid (Tilley, 1992). It is a narrative structure that generally consists of providing background information on the character, the insert of a problem to be solved, action to solve the problem, a moment of great tension, and conclusion. The diagram below illustrates the Freytag's Pyramid followed by the defined six sections.

Freytag's Pyramid



Freytag's Pyramid is a structure that applies to many classical forms of literature, but not too many modern pieces of literature (Tilley, 1992). As I began to sequence the story line of *It's My Party*, I began to note that I was not interested in a linear story line. In fact, I viewed the story more like a cube that was constantly flipping. I was interested in constantly shifting the landscape of the story. Therefore, I intentionally fractured the story into small vignettes that contrasted each other. I explored this through the use of different choreographic approaches such as playing with literal and abstract interpretations, emotional range, loud verse quiet moments, and stillness versus virtuosic movement, and full ensemble work verse solo work. These motifs manifested in all production elements: lights, costuming, objects, media, sound, and script. My intention in constantly changing the sensual landscape of the production was to keep the audience engaged and disoriented.

I also believed there needed to be a balance expressed throughout the production to reflect my assumption that HIV is challenging subject to approach. I discovered this

approach of “shifting the landscape” provided the necessary setup for numerous “reveals,” which added to the rhythm of the story. Reveals, in a narrative structure, are plot devices that are presented to the audience that show new hidden pieces of information or insight in the plot or performance (Ball, 1983). Considering one of the underlying themes of *It’s My Party* was secrets, I felt it was appropriate to repeatedly present the audience with new revelations of information such as disclosing my HIV+ status. Reveals were seen throughout the production through the presentation of metaphoric objects and the introduction of new characters. Working with the theme of birthdays provided ample opportunities to use boxes, wrapped like presents, as containers for various hidden objects. As various objects kept appearing throughout the production their application transformed from a utilitarian device to an abstract metaphor with new meaning and subtext.

At the end of my three-month incubation where I assessed, processed, and found my customized solution for my concept, I was ready to enter into the studio and begin to construct my applied project. I see that three-month journey as a significant investment of time for conceptualization that provided me the blueprint and confidence to be an informed director, choreographer, designer, and collaborator. As I entered into the next chapter of my applied project, the creative process, I continued to view my work through the lens of a graphic designer as I choreographed, devised, rehearsed, edited video, and layered each of these elements together into one cohesive production.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

“One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star”

Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosopher

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After my three-month incubation period, where I refined the concept of my applied project and began to develop a narrative structure for the piece, I entered into a six-month rehearsal process. During this period, I began to take my conceptual sketches and bring them to life. This was when technical and artistic experimentation occurred in choreography, visual media development, script writing, and the usage of props. In order to orchestrate all these elements, there was a need to develop a structured schedule to monitor the creation of each component of this multimedia dance theatre production. The schedule also took into account the pacing of disclosing my diagnosis to all necessary parties involved in the performance. In retrospect, I can see similarities between my approach to creating live art and my approach to creating graphic art. Both approaches start at the end.

Scheduling

With a piece of choreography, I begin by outlining a master production schedule. In creating it, I began by looking at my deadline (opening night) and work backwards to the first day of rehearsal. For this project, my calculations included factoring in tech week, production meetings, installation time, holidays, and the Graduate Project Presentations (a formal MFA Dance showcase). Once this master schedule was outlined, I then strategically inserted formal committee showings, costume development, prop design, and “guesstimating” the learning curve that is inherent to the rehearsal process. All of these elements informed the progression of the work, development of the scenes,

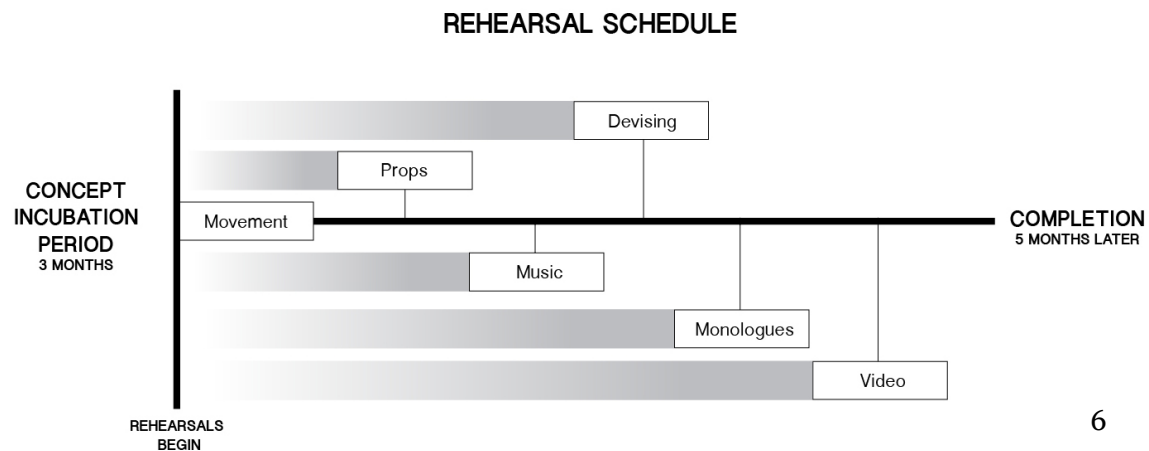
and most importantly the approach to the content of the show, specifically disclosing my personal diagnosis with the cast, committee, production team, and so forth. This master schedule became the road map for creating *It's My Party*. Abiding to its structure was of the utmost importance because it subdivided this monumental production into manageable parts. Below is a general outline of the significant landmark events that constituted the master schedule.

Master Schedule

2015	May 11	Committee Meeting (present prospectus)
2015	May 11	Disclose (to committee)
2015	September 29	Committee Showing 1 (show concept presented)
2015	Early October	Disclose (to cast)
2015	October 29-30	Committee Showing 2 (50% show completed)
2015	December 6	Committee Showing 3 (90% show completed)
2015	December 7	Check-in with cast
2016	Early January	Disclose (to production faculty)
2016	January 18	Committee Showing 4 (100% show completed)
2016	January 25	Disclose (to student production team)
2016	January 29	Opening Night

Once the master schedule was outlined, I then further subdivided the creative parts that collectively formed the production. Foreseeing that the production was composed of video, dance, spoken word, scene work, and to be set in a customized arena, it was important that I determine the rehearsal schedule for each of these components by working backwards from the master schedule. I deconstructed the whole work into

individual components, which consisted of dance rehearsals, scene rehearsals, video development, and scripting of the monologues, which helped prioritize my production needs. Once I had that order, it was evident that the production needed to start with the dancers. Considering movement was present in over 75% of the show, a significant amount of time was allocated to developing choreography. However, although my focus may have started with movement, I was certainly active in kick starting initiatives in the other areas of the production. The diagram below illustrates my priorities and illustrates how they fell into place in the construction of the work. The following section further breaks down the rehearsal process for each component of the production.



Movement

The choreographic approach of my applied project was very methodical. As I sketched out the order of the narrative, I determined which sections required movement and which ones did not. In the end, I had twelve sections: seven were movement based and five were acting based.

In general, I approached each movement section as a structured, task-based improvisation. By setting specific parameters, the performers could focus on the execution of the task (e.g., moving in a specific qualitative manner, following in a

cannon, responding to cause and effect scenarios) rather than on set choreography. This task-based approach to creating choreography gave creative flexibility and autonomy to the dancers.

My choreographic priority was to create visual moments. This is reflective of my appreciation of still photography, which is a significant visual element in print design. One of the ways I often approach creating a performance work is to think about several still moments or a “photographic moments” that might have a lasting impression on a viewer. Once I determined these photographic moments, then the next step of my choreographic process was to work backwards and problem solve how to arrive at these moments. In a choreographic structure, one could call these “plot points” as they were called in a narrative structure. These points were spaced throughout the timeline of the dance to shape the work’s narrative.

The only instances when I choreographed to music were the first and last sections of the entire production. The reason for this was that I wanted to be strategic and establish specific visual and movement motifs and metaphoric revelations at the beginning of the work that would manifest at the end, hopefully with a new sense of meaning, at the end of the work. These “bookend sections,” meaning mirrored moments of the beginning seen at the end, helped to create a sense that the story had come full circle. An example of this could be seen in the story of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (Lewis, 2008). The protagonist enters into the mystical land of Narnia through the wardrobe, goes through an adventure, and returns back into the real world passing through the same wardrobe for which they had entered. Considering that my story was interpretive of a journey, this full circle resolution help convey the transformation of the protagonist.

I also choreographed to the music for these sections because both soundtracks possessed lyrics that were purposefully interpreted through movement. The first soundtrack was The Beatle's hit song *Birthday* (1968). An example of a literal interpretation of the lyrics was when the chorus in the song said, "today is your birthday," I had the dancers point randomly at the audience or at a balloon. Video projections, featured on three walls surrounding the audience, were synced to the soundtrack to further emphasize staging, phrasing, and conceptual intention. The ending soundtrack was Whitney Houston's *Greatest Love of All* (1985). The song, within the context of the show, first began as a lip-sync performance by an actor that directly established the literal interpretation of the lyrics. The dancers were featured as background dancers, and their choreography included synchronized moments between the actor and dancers. In true bookend style, there were several reprised moments in staging and movement from the first dance section included in the finale. This provided continuity and cohesion while also allowing the audience to "pass through the wardrobe" and return back the start of the dance, hopefully anew.

The actual creation of choreographic phrases and movement was a collaborative effort. Sometimes, I entered the rehearsal studio with set choreography and other times movement was created from improvisational scores. The choreography I provided was mainly created through abstract gestures I sequenced together. For example, I would select five still gestures and then investigate different movement pathways to connect each gesture. Another aspect of my choreographic process was creating choreography to other soundtracks and then resetting that choreography to the actual show soundtrack. I learned this approach while working with Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company, and I found it leads to unexpected yet fascinating musical interpretations by deconstructing and reconstructing the kinesthetic rhythms in the choreography.

The movement phrases that the dancers created were developed through the use of objects and through text. Since metaphoric objects were a significant component to the production, I spent several sessions in the beginning of the rehearsal process having the dancers dance with objects. As a choreographer, I am interested in how I can re-contextualize the meaning of familiar, found objects through movement. In other words, I am fascinated with the idea of animating the inanimate. In theatre, this is known as “object theatre,” where actors take ordinary found objects (e.g., a cup, a plant, toilet paper, a scarf) and animate them through their scene work (Cash, 2013). Many times I approach the relationship between object and mover as a duet, specifically focusing on the timing, physical orientation, functionality, dancer focus, and the spatial relationship between an object and the body.

In the rehearsal process, I led the dancers through several sessions of dancing with either a balloon or box, which both had metaphorical significance in the work. The session consisted of the dancers becoming familiar with the weight and physical properties of the object, using that weight to create momentum or suspension in their movement, and seeing how their body naturally reacts to moving with the object. This usually led to dancers indirectly activating their reflex muscles, which avoided any movement predisposition or habitual movement patterns or choices. I lead the dancers through various prompts to explore new ways to handle the objects. By leading the dancers through these exercises, I was able to see an array of movement options, or creative solutions. I considered this process to be analogous to “sketching,” a common practice in 2D art forms. This sketching provided the dancers an opportunity to have ownership in the work by respecting and including their creativity and ideas into the show.

My other approach to improvisation was to provide text for the dancers to interpret to create the movement for the most abstract and structured improvisation in the work, the section of the work I refer to as the “therapy section.” In context to the show, this is where I recounted personal epiphanies discovered in my own counseling experience as a patient. The section featured five vignettes each with different anecdotes that were performed by either a solo dancer or duet. For each vignette, I gave each dancer a quote that was relative to the mood or theme of the anecdote such as empowerment, defeat, isolation, or compassion. From that point, I asked the dancers to each create a phrase they could repeat. Individually, I discussed their concept and helped refine their movement to include more dynamics or be more inline with the conceptual intent. Having the dancers create their own solo work helped dancers commit to their performance in an embodied manner and perform their interpretation of the moment. Although I was speaking about my personal story, these were the dancers’ moments and therefore the movement needed to be authentic to them. This also helped me arrive to creative solutions I might not have otherwise thought of, much like the solutions that emerged through the improvisations moving with an object.

Props

Inundated throughout the course of the production was the use of props. The production’s central metaphor of birthdays provided ample opportunities to bring in an array of thematic objects such as balloons, presents, streamers, party hats, a piñata, and more. The use of props transformed both the performers and space. For example, to create a party atmosphere at the start of the show, star shaped balloons outlined the perimeter of the dance space. During the opening dance numbers, the performers moved the balloon into the interior of the dance space. When the opening number ended, the party atmosphere shifted into the presentation of outer space with a shift of lighting,

video projection, and sound. Suddenly the star shaped balloons served as atmospheric decor as they floated above scattered performers on the floor. The rearrangement and distribution of the objects assisted in the alteration of the space from one scene to another.

As objects were used to transform the space and the appearance of the dancers. An example of this was in the use of party hats. Party hats were first distributed to both the audience and then the performers at the start of the show. For the audience, this facilitated audience interaction, which helped develop rapport with the performance. Later into the piece, the performers used the same party hats in a new conceptual manner. Concealing their identities, the hats were placed over the faces of the dancers, transforming the appearance of the performers from humans into alien-like creatures that moved throughout the space. The concept behind this reinterpretation of the familiar object, the party hat, was to convey that the dancers were no longer themselves but instead new characters that represented the protagonist's story of losing his identity.

Most importantly, objects were used as metaphors for characters. This was best seen in the ending scene between the protagonist and actor. In their final scene, the actor states "you are never really alone," as he grabs the star shaped balloon that had been attached to the protagonist throughout the entire performance. As the actor draws faces on both sides of the balloon he states, "you see, you'll always have your friends and family with you wherever you go."

The use of props was critical to the production because of their role in creating new choreography, providing unexpected reveals for the audience, creating environment, and for their iconic representation of transformation that was an overarching theme within the narrative. In ways, the props become tertiary characters in the production,

which diversified the audience's focus and added another layer of intrigue to the storyline in their literal and abstract interpretations.

Music

The musical selections featured in *It's My Party* were specific and intentional. Although the production began in a party atmosphere, the story ventured into several abstract concepts that the musical selections helped to convey. Opening and closing the production was the use of two popular songs. The first was *Birthday* (1968) by The Beatles. As addressed in previous sections, *Birthday* (1968) became a signature anthem in the establishment of the narrative and the setup of the production at a birthday party. Energetic and lively, this song was chosen to create a scenario that was familiar to the audience and reflects the protagonist's anxiety. The second song was *Greatest Love of All* (1985) performed by Whitney Houston. This song was played as the finale. Light hearted and tender, the song was performed to the protagonist in the form of a lip-synch by another performer. Written in the lyrics are expressions of transformation and enlightenment. Eventually, the protagonist assumes the lip-synching and sings about his discovery of self-love. Between these two musical moments, the soundscape featured several ambient soundtracks. This was interpretative of the abstract challenges the protagonist encountered venturing away from his reality and into introspective contemplation.

Devising

As mentioned earlier, along with integrating movement and video into the production, I was interested in including an actor. While conceptualizing the narrative, I already knew I wanted to engage with the audience in several monologues. However, I did not feel that my voice should be the only voice in the production. To support the narrative and move the storyline forward, I felt the principal, myself, needed a

companion in the story to assist in the transformation of the principal character. Because of the seriousness of the subject matter and the emotional content of my monologues, I needed a second character with a different perspective to provide a balance. In the Analysis portion of this document, I address the dynamics that existed between all the characters and how collectively they all contributed to the narrative as a whole.

Devised theatre is a theatrical practice of creating a script not from a writer but from a collective, usually through improvisation; it is about inventing, adapting, and creating within a group (Oddey, 1996). The group creates a framework or structure that explores ideas, images, concepts, and themes that utilize music, text, objects, or movement that is self-edited while it is being devised. It is a democratic approach to creating theatrical work in which authorship is shared amongst a collective rather than possessed by one individual, such as a director or playwright, as each participant's contribution has equal value. I approached rehearsals with the actor in a devised fashion for two reasons. The first was because I wanted the actor to have a sense of ownership in his contribution to the production, just as the dancers had. The second was to help the actor develop his character – a drag queen called “America.”

I was interested in including a drag queen in the production because drag plays with identity and to provide comic relief. I originally approached Nicholas Chizek as a drag dramaturge because of his research interest in drag culture as a theatrical tool in storytelling. Along with being a trained actor, I was interested in working with Chizek because he already had a drag persona to build from. This is where working in a devised manner complimented our rehearsal process and the character development of America.

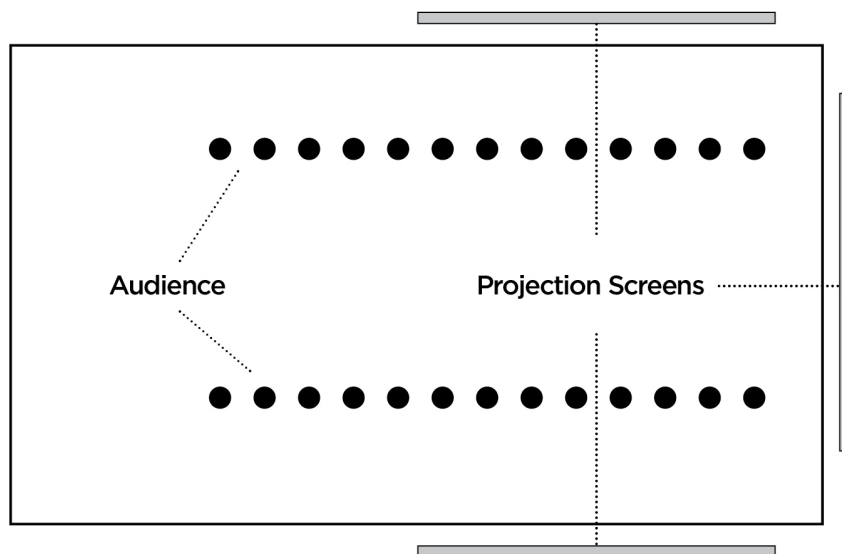
As we began our work, I entered each rehearsal with an outline of the scene. For example, when devising the scene where the two characters meet, my instructions were, “This is the scene our characters meet. We need to introduce ourselves, we need to

identify that we are at a birthday party, you should ask about some personal facts, I will object to you interrupting the moment, you will inquire about what am I trying to hide.” From that point we engaged in improvisational scene work that was guided by the objectives I laid out. Each attempt at the scene went through a revision of either problem solving the story’s continuity or refining the dialogue and sequence of events, which allowed both performers to exercise being authentic to their characters and an approach to the scene.

Video

To support of the narrative, I included the use of video projection as a way to create environment and subtext. For cohesion, video was mainly featured at the beginning and closing sections of the production since both sections established the setting, a party. The graphic elements I used in the motion graphics were balloons, fireworks, spiral textures, dots, and a pattern of plus signs that undulated in size and shape. This pattern of plus signs was a subtle way of interpreting the existence of HIV in the space through the video. The video was projected onto three large screens that

Immersive Environment Layout



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surrounded the audience to create an immersive environment. This three-panel arrangement allowed the video to be presented as a triptych of three separated video channels. To contrast the upbeat tone of the song *Birthday* (1968) by The Beatles in the opening section of the production, I was interested in conveying a subtle undertone of distress and disgruntled-ness in my approach to the motion graphics. I achieved this through hard cuts in the editing that continually changed amongst the three screens. The intention was to over stimulate the eye. At the end of the work, after the protagonist returned from his journey victorious, the video featured many of the same graphic elements that were featured at the beginning, however more cohesively executed in a panoramic shot across the triptych with few hard cuts.



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring JibJab video created by Ricardo Alvarez in *It's My Party*.

1

Since, from a macro perspective, the production was about identity it was important that I portrayed not only my identity but also featured the identities of my cast members, as they represented extensions of my persona and psyche as a Greek chorus.

Therefore, as part of the video footage, I incorporated headshots of the cast members in the form of JibJab characters. With the use of a green screen, I video recorded three dancers, one male and two females, and then photographed headshots for all five of the dancers. Through post-editing, I combined the still image headshots with the animated bodies. The headshots featured a range of expressions from happy, to surprised, to angry, to confused. The dancers wore their costumes to further draw a connection between the real performer and the virtual performer depicted in the video. The movement captured in front of the green screen consisted of common dance club moves or choreography from the dance itself. Pairing the photographed headshots with the animated bodies, I created twelve variations of each virtual character. I posed several duets and trios in the video shoot, which added nicely to the library of JibJab footage I created in post-editing in After Effects, a special effects video software. By combining contrasting elements (e.g., angry faces with excited bodies), I created a provoking juxtaposition of emotions. To further provoke this juxtaposition, I create contrast between the performer and their virtual selves through expression and through scale. In design, this is referred to as playing with the proportions in a composition. Seeing the performers projected virtually two to three times larger than their actual size only further emphasized the ludicrousness and chaotic feel of the section.

The triptych video installation was used several other times in the production to create different environments that supported the narrative such as in the depiction of space, patriotism, and as a slide show. Without its presence, much of the subtext in the story would have been lost, and the establishment of different scenes would not have been as effective. More importantly, since the audience was placed within an immersive environment, this dissolved the fourth wall and created intimacy between the audience and performers.

Monologues

Along with the inclusion of devising scenes with an actor, I incorporated monologues into the production. The purpose of these monologues was to create character development, share my own personal history, and address the subject of HIV stigma head on. The tone of these monologues ranged from objective commentary to heartfelt personal stories. Examples include the retelling of my struggle with accepting my diagnosis and disclosing to my family, both of which were challenging experiences. Although my monologues were the last element to be brought into the rehearsal studio, their development began the first day I returned to back to Arizona from my three-month conceptualization period.

I was deliberate in withholding the public presentation of my monologues in the rehearsal studio when working with other performers because I did not want to distract them from settling into their roles. Since I was the sole individual delivering these monologues, I could rehearse my monologues on my own time. In truth, I never rehearsed my monologues in real time, aloud, in an empty space until it was time for me to present the work as a whole in an informal work in-progress showing. The reason for this was because I wanted to preserve and monitor my emotional well-being. Considering that most of my monologues were the retelling of my personal story, they were at times evocative to remember, talk about, and perform. I was cautious of becoming too mechanical or over rehearsed. I felt it was important that I remain honest and vulnerable when retelling these stories, which required giving myself permission to be open to recalling my emotional state while reflecting on my past history. Therefore, because of this evocative fragility, I was conservative with how much time I devoted to fully narrating and embody these past memories and feelings. Although I may not have been vocally rehearsing my monologues along with the other performers, I was mentally

and emotionally contextualizing my monologues to the work that was being rehearsed at the time. When we began to rehearse larger sections of the production together, I would bypass the delivery of my monologues by focusing only on my staging during them. The only instances when I rehearsed lines from my monologues were when another performer was dependent on a verbal cue from me in order to fulfill their role.

Although my monologues were rarely performed aloud, it does not mean they were never rehearsed. On the contrary, I was constantly rehearsing the script I had created through the use of index cards. When it came time for me to compose my monologues, I began by making a list of all the talking points that were important to address. These talking points provided the outline for the script's structure and were made up of questions and answers I had discovered while coming to terms with my condition that were based on my own stigma towards myself and personal history. Subjects I focused on were my own mortality, sense of identity, self worth, my coming out story, shame, compassion, and authenticity. I revisited standout moments such as sitting in the doctor's office, going home for the first time, meeting with a psychic, and my own personal counseling sessions. From these moments, I extracted conversations or comments made to me.

All of these talking points were recorded into one main list from which the content of my monologues was pulled. I then divided each talking point onto its own index card. This way I could literally move things around and gather relative ideas together. I quickly saw that my monologues needed to be established in a chronological order. This meant I needed to address specific concepts in a linear fashion such as introducing myself, introducing the subject of stigma and the dual concept of birthdays, disclosing my diagnosis, addressing the challenges of searching for acceptance, and then showing the arrival to acceptance. Once I had these "headlines," I then organized the

index cards beneath the appropriate headline, which was an effective approach to writing the script that easily lent itself to a structured improvisational score.

My approach to my monologues became a cyclical process of formulating, processing, editing, and rehearsing my monologues even after the opening of the show because of its improvisational score. This was because I was constantly reassessing my monologues and reorganizing the index cards based on the pacing of the show and how they sat in the wholeness of the show. Even once the show opened, I continued to refine my monologues based on the feedback I received from audience members. Receiving new audience feedback was encouraging and informative in the development of these monologues because of how rarely they were performed publically.

Synthesizing

Once all the components of the production were in development, gradually I began to layer the elements together. This additive process first began with movement, incorporating objects, and music. Often I entered each rehearsal with a list of objectives to “sketch.” Through my design background I have been accustomed to working with a sketchbook, either hardbound or digitally, to work out ideas and concepts. In the dance studio, I implemented the same ideology. This was achieved by looking at a section of movement or staging and quickly going through various modifications in quality, facing, levels, etc. I referred to the decision-making as choosing between “camera 1 or camera 2,” with each “camera” being a different look. Going through several hypothetical sketches in a session helped me efficiently construct the work.

Since each element of the work (i.e. dance, devising, monologues, and video) interpreted a different part of the story, I divided the story into twelve sections. Once the story was broken down into smaller parts, I could then add each element to the appropriate section. Another benefit of breaking the narrative down into twelve parts

was that it allowed me to drastically change the atmosphere of each scene, which created variety amongst the sections in the narrative. Rhythmically the twelve sections broke into four parts, which generally consisted of a monologue, a dance sequence, and an abstract moment.

Although Freytag's Pyramid was not an appropriate narrative structure for the work as a whole, following this structure proved useful in crafting each individual section. Each section began with a brief introduction that set the tone or mood. Gradually some form of excitement, intrigue, or suspense would build until a climatic moment. This climax usually took the form of some sort of standout musical moment, whether a loud crescendo or silence. During the Falling Action and Resolution, the focus would then shift towards setting up the framework for the following section. This calculated approach to the overarching narrative is where attention to rhythm, variety, and unity was emphasized.

Feedback

Feedback was a critical asset in the development of this work, especially considering that I was performing in the production. Feedback sessions followed each formal presentation of the work over a five-month rehearsals period. My MFA committee, a collective that consisted of accomplished artists in the field of performance, video, and improvisation, served as the core group of critics. Since much of my work sat within a theatrical domain, it was critical that I also received feedback from experts in theatre to address specific concerns with the narrative structure of the work.

Most of my feedback sessions focused on the story, visual impact, and continuity in the work. Since the story possessed a vaudeville sort of eclectic-ness, I was in need of outside opinions that could assess the organization and crafting of multiple storylines. The most valuable information I received during these consultations were the

affirmations on the narrative structure and belief in the work. The strongest advisement I received regarded editing the work. The committee's editing suggestions and questions played a critical role in crafting the work's pacing and the abstraction or literal representation of ideas in each section. Monitoring the rhythm of the story contributed to the creation of dynamic shifts in tonality and impact that allowed audiences to form their own conclusions about the work.

It was not until the last two showings that I began to invite new attendees who were unfamiliar with the scope of the production and only knew that its central concept was about birthdays. As imaginable, their opinions were very insightful as it gave me much more unbiased opinions. What I valued from these new perspectives was that observers could comment more on the journey of the piece, how immersive the experience was for them, and the impact of the various revealing moments throughout the show.

By the time I had entered into tech week, and the show was rehearsed as an entire production, the feedback shifted from refining individual sections to addressing issues in continuity in the story and the theatrical pacing of the production as a whole. This was mainly provided by the production director and my committee chair, who attended all of the dress rehearsals.

Disclosing

As previously addressed, open communication was of utmost importance to me throughout the entire rehearsal process regarding my diagnosis. I wanted to be transparent about the subject of my show with those I invited into the process. As much as I was conscious of how I disclosed my status to someone outside of the rehearsal studio, I was also conscious of how I disclosed to those involved in the production.

Through my personal experience, I saw disclosing consisted of two common conversations, the immediate conversation and the follow up conversation.

During the initial conversation, the moment of disclosing, I felt what was imperative to communicate was that I was in good health, I had a support network established, I was on medication, and I was “ok.” Along with these affirmations, I made it a points to always address a few frequently asked questions straight on such as other people’s safety, how HIV is not transmitted, and that I was not going to die. Though dramatic, this last affirmation was meant to address the common immediate sense of loss that was almost always universally felt by everyone to whom I disclosed. It is a fear that is understandable, I think, because of the impression most all of us experienced from the AIDS epidemic and, perhaps, a universal unfamiliarity with the subject of HIV. Once I went through this script, I always end it with granting permission for my friends to talk to me about my condition at any time. To me, having open and transparent conversations about my diagnosis was important to my relationships. This concluding disclaimer was meant to prepare both parties for the second conversation that I typically face – the follow up.

I found that usually my second conversation was an anxious one. I believe this was so because people did not know how to talk about things. Our friendship had entered into a new domain. It was no longer about just living but, instead there was now an elephant in the room—or was there? It was my impression that there was a need for these individuals to re-familiarize themselves with me, and see or process that I am not a different person. Perhaps this was a slight projection of my insecurities, but I do not completely think so. I think it was just a natural adjustment people go through when they are processing their affiliation to someone based on the acquirement of new information. It is a subject of assigning identity and recognition. I believe people may

think, “is this person [me] the same as I have always known or is there something different (e.g., is he going to die, is he weak, maybe he is not so innocent, is he careless, maybe he is a deviant)?” I felt during these follow up conversations people needed time to recalibrate, reestablish their understanding of who I am, and figure out how to navigate talking about the subject of HIV that was both comfortable for them and respectful of me.

It should be clarified that no one in my cast was aware of my diagnosis before agreeing to work with me or before starting the rehearsal process. It was not until a month into rehearsals that I decided to disclose to my cast. The reason for this was that I wanted to first hear my committee’s feedback about the outline of my story before I shared that story with my cast. It was important to me that I was direct and intentional in disclosing with my cast, therefore I waited for my committee’s approval before discussing the work in depth with my cast. Up until this point, the only understanding my cast had was that my applied project was “based on the idea of birthdays.” To what extent that interpretation meant, I left ambiguous. I did, however, refer to several of the sub themes of life, death, beginnings, and destiny. When the time was right for me to disclose to my cast, I ended our rehearsal early and relocated the cast to a private space. I informed them that I was going to play for them the audiotape that narrates the entire scope of the project, however, before that playback I wanted to discuss the true concept of the show – that the show was about the HIV coming out process and that the story was my own. I then proceeded to go through the same disclosing script I had gone through with many of my close friends outside of the studio, checked in to see how everyone was doing, played the audiotape, spoke about my hopes for the work, and then about the importance I felt everyone’s contributions was adding to the discourse of HIV stigma.

Before entering into that meeting, I had already made an agreement with myself. I told myself, “do not cry but allow yourself to be open and vulnerable. Stick to the plan and tasks at hand. Be strong and show you are resilient. And, stay calm and collected.” This was the mantra I hold myself accountable to for the next four months. I felt successful with how I disclosed to my cast, and I even received several compliments for how mature and collected I was in talking about something so personal. I think the stoic nature of my disclosure to my cast allowed them to focus on their tasks rather than be distracted by any emotional fatigue due to the subject of the show. It was not until December when I presented 90% of the completed show, which included my monologues, that I sat down with my cast and talked more in depth about the show. After all, this was the cast’s first time seeing the show in its entirety.

The following rehearsal I decided to check-in with the cast and reassess how their performance went for our third showing. What I had allotted to be an hour conversation ended up taking the entire three-hour rehearsal period. Although we did not rehearse, the time we spent talking about the show felt very appropriate and necessary. We sat down in the space and I opened the conversation up by asking my cast, “how did the showing go for you?” I was thankful that they had so many thoughts and questions regarding the story and structure of the piece. For the cast, “everything made sense.” They understood the significance of the vaudeville-like narrative structure, they understood the emotional range and delicacy written into the show, they saw how their contributions added to the production, and they were engaged by my monologues. Questions the cast asked about my monologues showed me I needed to address a few misconceptions about HIV. For example, I needed to clarify the difference between someone having HIV and someone who has AIDS, because it is common to mistakenly assume the two are the same, which they are not. Because I share specific details about

my medical history in my monologues, I defined what certain medical terms mean. I also went into further depths about my story that I did not discuss in my monologues, so that the cast understood where certain motifs or conceptual moments emerged. It was important for me to be transparent with my cast as I felt it gave them greater appreciation for the work and their contributions.

Personally, I think there is a difference between emotionally unloading onto someone, being emotional, and being emotionally open. To me, they are shades of one's emotional range and stability. In the early days of my diagnosis, I certainly had my need to emotionally unload. I viewed this as asking someone to hold a very heavy rock for you. It may bring relief but it also can be a burden to others. Being emotional, to me, means there is no burden handed over, however I view this state as being fragile. This is a person that needs to be handled with care because they could breakdown very easily. The last state, being emotionally open, I view as a house with its windows open. It is a sound structure that is unwavering, however its windows are open to allow the wind to breathe in and out of its structure. It is a state of being that gives permission for feelings to surface and then be let go of. Nothing can compromise the structure, because it is grounded. This is the state in which I viewed myself functioning at during the end of the rehearsal process. Although I might express emotions during my monologues, this was much different than the emotional intensity I expressed during the early days of my diagnosis. I explained this emotional range to my cast and identified that I felt grounded, that I felt emotionally in control of my feelings, and that I am "ok" in talking about my personal history both on and off stage. It was not until four months into the rehearsal process that I presented my monologues to my cast; at that point, they were truly able to experience the depth of the work. I think it would have been a much different experience had I dove into such intensity earlier in the rehearsal process. When asked, my cast

agreed, commenting that they felt so prepared in what their tasks were that they were able to shift between listening/experiencing the work and focusing on their task.

If I were to reconstruct this work with a new cast, I do not think I could change this process. For myself, the performers' physical, mental, and emotional health were of utmost importance. Processing the subject of HIV, whether for someone diagnosed or for someone undiagnosed, I believe, requires time. Therefore, I approached the subject of disclosing constructively. This means, I subdivided each subject so that there was one focus processed by the performer at a time. I prioritized the performers' autonomy first, by equipping them with their tasks and function in the production. Once they had a mastery of that role, I then introduced the conceptual themes of the production. This, I believe, allowed the performers to make connections between their role and story in a non-confrontational or overwhelming way. Because the performers had achieved autonomy first, they could rely on this structure when processing what may have been emotional challenging content.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS: THE PLACE OF INQUIRY

“If you can’t love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else?”

Rupaul, Drag Queen

5

It is estimated that there are over one million nerve fibers that send signals from the eye to the brain, and an estimated twenty billion neurons analyzing and integrating this visual information at rapid speeds (Malamed, 2009). Connect these neurological receivers and transmitters to your brain, and the reservoir of the mind fills with memories, data, information, and our understanding of “truths.” Philosopher John Locke (Petryszak, 1981) commented about these mental reservoirs in his proposal that our minds are born as a blank slate or what he refers to as a “tabula rasa.” Contrary to the opinions of his contemporaries of the 17th century who objected that people are born with predispositions and pre-existing concepts, Locke believed that it was through the human experience of living that individuals formulate their own ideas and understanding of the world through their sense perception (Malamed, 2009). The amazing power of visual communication is that it does not merely pertain to the aesthetics of an object or experience but instead taps deeper into human psychology, socio-cultural understanding, neurological recognition, phenomenology, cognitive reasoning, semiotics, emotionality, spiritual beliefs, politics, symbolism, and much more. I am drawn to visual communication not for the superficial practice of “making things look pretty” but for the power to communicate a message and transform a viewer’s perception, understanding, and cognitive reasoning to the world around them.

The Hero's Journey

When examining the compositional and narrative structure of *It's My Party*, I saw it did not follow the one-dimensional Freytag's Pyramid. There were too many plot points woven into the narrative's structure such as the biological meaning of birthdays and the renewal of one's HIV care. It was important to me to interpret the complex emotional and psychological journey I experienced in coming to terms with accepting my HIV+ diagnosis. While assessing the message, my focus was not just to portray a tragedy, but to instead delicately present the loss and regaining of one's identity. When I had completed the work, I noticed its narrative structure possessed many more significant events than are outlined in Freytag's Pyramid. This led me to discover the narrative structure of the Hero's Journey.

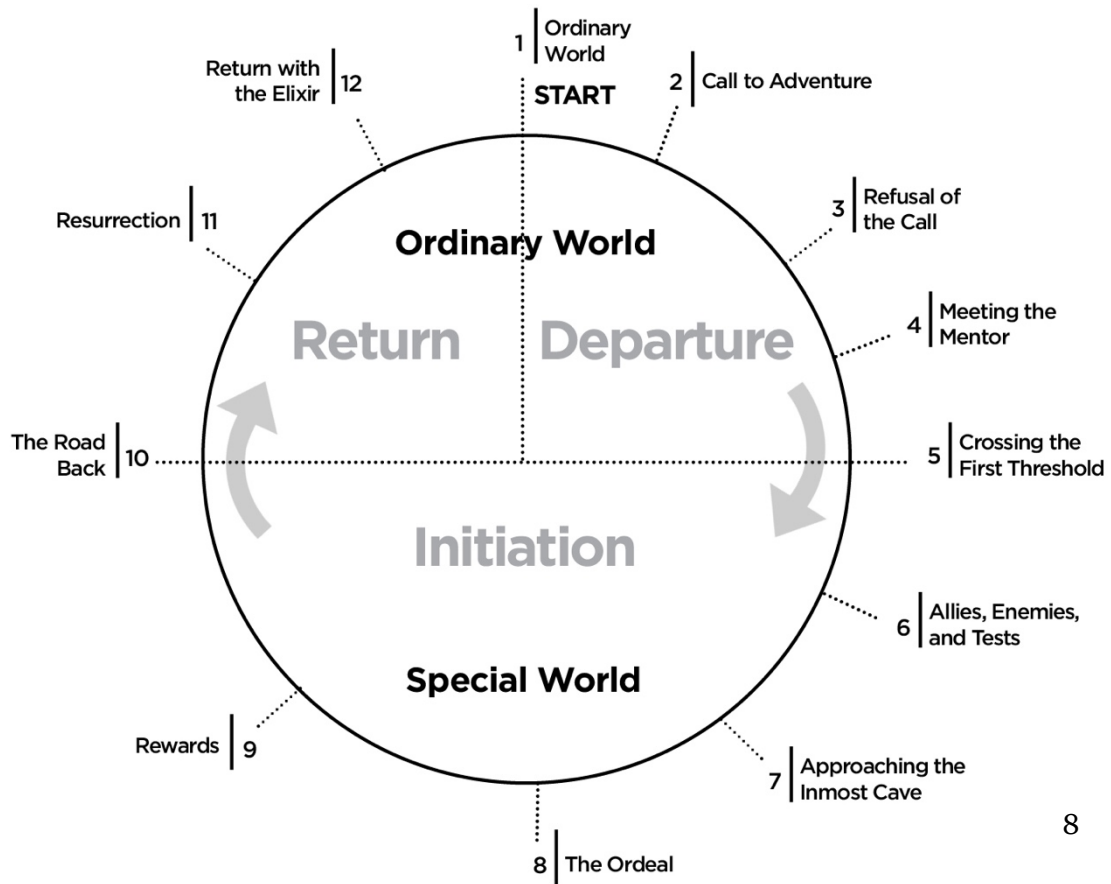
The Hero's Journey, or "monomyth," is a structural form of narrative that was identified by American mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1987). It is a structural pattern in narratives that Campbell has observed in many ancient myths, aural storytelling, religious rituals from around the world, and in psychological development. These narratives focus around the "hero" and dives deep into the hero's psyche. The unique structure of the monomyth is created so that the hero encounters struggles for psychological wholeness in a "Special World," only to return back to the "Ordinary World" as a transformed individual. The Ordinary World is signified by what is familiar and "real" to the hero. When the hero enters into the Special World, it is a realm of fantasy or a destination with new rules, value systems, symbols, and meaning that both challenges and awards the hero his or her new identity. In Campbell's words, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are then encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man"

(Campbell, 1987, p. 23). The Hero's Journey has been seen in such iconic stories such as *Star Wars*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and numerous biblical tales.

Campbell's development of the Hero's Journey was influenced by the theories of the individual by Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Carl Jung. Jung (Jung, 1980) believed that individuation is the development of the consciousness and is the central process of human development. In Jung's words individuation is a "process by which individual beings are being formed and differentiated... having as its goal the development of the individual personality" (Campbell, 1987, p.94). Individuation is process of becoming aware of the different selves operating within the psyche by differentiating them from each other. To achieve this, an imaginative engagement between the ego consciousness and the hidden contents of the unconscious dialogue. In a breakdown of the Hero's Journey one can see the stages of transformation that are complimentary to Jung's belief in the development of the individual once the hero exits the Ordinary World and ventures through and exits from the Special World. It is during this time that the hero is faced with challenges that deconstruction his or her beliefs, social understanding, or character. Once the hero exits the Special World, he or she is reconstructed into a new image of himself or herself. This process could also be viewed as a moment of liminality, in which the construction of a rite of passage in the Hero's Journey.

The structure of the Hero's Journey is far more elaborate than Freytag's Pyramid. It is defined by twelve events, which are categorized into three sections known as the Departure, Initiation, and Return. Below is a diagram of the twelve events in the Hero's Journey.

The Hero's Journey



Although it was not my intention to structure the narrative in this format, there are many similarities between The Hero's Journey and the narrative arc of *It's My Party*. Inherent to this structural narrative are elements of transformation that manifest in the layout of the story. Taking into account how diverse and contrasting each scene was designed, as a means to create variety and emphasis, subdividing the overall story into the signature phases of the Hero's Journey helps illuminate the unity in the gestalt of the narrative. Additionally, following the Hero's Journey provided the creative liberties to abstract the narrative through the transformation of the space, costume changes, inclusion of metaphoric objects, and dramatic changes in the soundscape. What follows

is my dramaturgical analysis of how the structure of *It's My Party* fits within the format of The Hero's Journey.

The Ordinary World



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Bailey Moore, Ricardo Alvarez, David Orlarte Katherine Dorn, and Sharon McCaman.

2

Explanation: The hero, uneasy, uncomfortable, or unaware is introduced sympathetically so the audience can identify with the situation or dilemma. The hero is shown against a background that reveals his environment, heredity, and personal history. Some kind of polarity in the hero's life is pulling in different directions and causing stress.

In Context: The Ordinary World is introduced in the first section of the work as the audience meets the charismatic protagonist (the hero) through audience interaction. The scene begins in a simulated dance party, which leads to an explosive dance to the song *Birthday* (1968) by The Beatle's. The dance is performed in a jovial manner, though woven into the choreography are subtle moments of peculiarity and aggression that juxtaposes the upbeat mood. The audience is confronted by polarizing depictions of joy and anxiety. The conflict of moods is also represented in the video, which depicts cast members featured as either floating head-shots or JibJab characters. The facial expressions in the video range from cute to clueless to disgruntled. The dynamic

oppositions presented in this section are meant to convey the uneasiness that exists within the hero and to foreshadow the tragedy ahead.

The Call to Adventure



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring the cast of *It's My Party*.

3

Explanation: Something shakes up the situation, either externally or from something rising up from deep within, so the hero must face the beginnings of change.

In Context: Following the chaotic introductory section is a dramatically ambient sound scape with minimal movement residing mainly on the floor. The performance space takes a dramatic shift in energy as an ominous voice calls the hero to move towards his destiny. The shift is meant to startle the audience's senses and challenge the predictability of the performance. The audience is transported into what appears to be outer space with visuals of stars, galaxies, and LED lights projected onto the walls. Audible breath work is brought into the choreography to create primordial aural textures that layer on top of the ambient soundscape. Towards the end of the section, the dancers slither across the floor as one entity to a collective spot and then lift one performer into the air. A voiceover speaks about simple poetic ideas of the birth of time, the biology of life, the start of our destinies, and the uncertainty of our futures. It is through the voiceover that the hero and audiences are alerted to the challenges that lie ahead. In the final words of the narrator, he states, "set your eyes on a distant star and reach. Take

hold of your destiny, and breathe,” which is a poetic foreshadowing comment to the hero to prepare for the journey ahead.

Refusal of the Call



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Bailey Moore, Sharon McCaman, Ricardo Alvarez, Katherine Dorn, and David Olarte.

4

Explanation: The hero, fearful of the unknown, tries to turn away from the adventure. Alternately, another character may express the uncertainty and danger ahead.

In Context: With the use of the ensemble as an interpretative extension of the hero’s emotional state of being, this third section depicts the hero’s challenges in refusing to accept his own destiny and the abandonment of his presented self. The section begins with a slow procession that is evocative of the hero’s hesitation to move forward on his journey. The hero slowly begins to breathe and giggle, and gradually starts to convulse until he reaches a manic, climatic gasp for air; this progression is representative of struggle and surrender, innocence, sexuality, infection, and defeat. The chorus awakens and collectively the group migrates in a slow diagonal procession. The chorus repeats small gestures, personifying the unease and struggle occurring within the hero. Matching the chorus in tempo, the hero struggles to stand as the chorus equally struggles to fall. A slow crescendo of a heartbeat plays in the background until protagonist comes to standing in the midst of his fallen chorus. The driving sound of a heart beating stops, and silence falls upon the room. Within the silence the hero punches

the floor, which quakes through the fallen chorus, and then takes hold of a microphone and in slow deep breaths says, “guten tag,” in an unrecognizable, inhuman tone.

Meeting with the Mentor



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Nicholas Chizek.

Explanation: The hero comes across a seasoned traveler of wisdom and courage who gives him training, equipment, or advice that will help on the journey.

In Context: In the following section of the work, the hero meets his mentor, America the drag queen. America positions herself as an ally to move both the story and hero forward in the journey. Preceding America’s entrance, the energy picks up again as the hero reengages with the audience in an open dialogue about birthday facts. The audience enters into a moment of exposition and backstory, learns about random birthday facts, is introduced to the hero’s family, and is informed about the other secret meanings behind the word “birthday.” The hero begins to unravel until the scene is abruptly interrupted by America, who enters the scene on a balance board. It is uncertain whether this new character is friend or foe, but the hero and America engage in witty banter. America presents herself as clever, glamorous, and risqué vixen. The hero shares his secret with America who is sympathetic towards the hero. There is chemistry between the two characters. America helps move both the story and hero forward by teasing, interviewing, and antagonizing the hero.

Crossing the Threshold



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring the cast of *It's My Party*.

6

Explanation: The hero commits to leaving the Ordinary World and entering a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values.

In Context: At this point in the work, the performance space is transformed again through chaos and slapstick comedy. The hero's identity is deconstructed and he is forced to assume a new identity by being tricked, disoriented, and redressed. He accepts his new identity, as he becomes a new character in this peculiar world. A random dance number emerges involving presents. The presents are tossed around and scattered throughout the space. Neon streamers are revealed from within the boxes and the space becomes more chaotic and transforms into another world of color and hysteria. The hero is no longer in a place of power; he is now a disoriented pawn within a tornado of colored streamers and glam. A wig, scarf, and pair of heels are revealed from within the presents and the chorus transforms the hero into drag. Concluding the scene, America and hero enter into a game with a star shaped piñata. The hero is blindfolded and asked to swing at the piñata. Eventually, America and chorus exit the space leaving the hero disempowered, disoriented, and abandoned in a new state of being that is far from the where he began his journey.

Tests, Allies, and Enemies



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Ricardo Alvarez.

7

Explanation: The hero is tested and sorts out allegiances in the Special World.

In Context: Left alone on stage, the hero addresses his insecurities. Remorseful of being fooled by America, the hero assesses what sort of supportive role she truly offered him. He strips himself of the imposed drag attire and tries to return to a place of normalcy. Alone with the audience, the hero tries to recalibrate by returning to his earlier thoughts about birthdays and the stigma around HIV. The hero then tests his vulnerability by disclosing his HIV status to the audience. He recounts the negative conversations he has had in the past with others about his diagnosis, which leads him to question his relationship with America, the audience, his family, God, and even himself. He is uncertain of what or who to believe in. This moment is climatic and is a true test of perseverance for the hero who is literally and figuratively abandoned. Measuring his state of mind and vulnerability, he feels his only option is to take a break in the moment, abandon his journey, and breathe. He calls upon the tech crew and requests a jovial song to be played as a distraction; *It's My Party* (Gore, 1965) starts to play, skipping like a broken record. The hero does not find solace in this song but defeat. He is exposed and uncertain of his relations with the audience, himself, and this foreign world. He is no longer in a place of empowerment but rather is in a state weakness.

Approach to the Inner Most Cave



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring the cast of *It's My Party*.

8

Explanation: The hero and newfound allies prepare for the major challenge in the Special world.

In Context: In this section, the hero reunites with his departed ensemble and America, which is symbolic of bannin together during a time of challenge. After the disclosure, the hero tries to leave the space but is retained by the reentering chorus. Together they stagger and stumble towards the up stage wall, running in a slow motion to convey contemplation and impending doom. The chorus and hero reprise the gestures performed during the Refusal of the Call, slowly reinterpreting the mental and emotional of the hero. America eventually joins the slow stampede and serves as an exterior force that propels the ensemble strongly forward as they proceed from a slow run to stumbling and falling towards the wall. Eventually each performer collides with the wall forming a tableau. The hero gestures goodbye to the audience before forcefully colliding with the wall upside down; he is now reunited with his Greek chorus in an uneasy tableau, as the audience awaits the beginning of the hero's most revealing moment.

The Ordeal



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Bailey Moore.

9

Explanation: The hero enters a central space in the Special World and confronts death or faces his or her greatest fear. Out of the moment of death comes a new life.

In Context: Within this section the hero reminisces about the fear he faced accepting his HIV status. The stories progress from tragedy to positive memories of empowerment as the hero searches to find his strength. Slowly, one by one, the performers peel away from the wall and reenter the performance space leaving the hero splattered against the wall. America places on the floor a gift for the hero. It is an audio cassette player that plays aloud a female's voice asking questions of the hero. The commentator on the tape asks the hero to recall and face his past traumas. The chorus undergoes a visual transformation as they conceal their identities by covering their faces with props. As the hero begins to recall specific moments of struggle and fear, the chorus members interpret these vignettes in movement. The story telling begins to shift from memories of struggle to memories of strength, providing the hero an opportunity to see hope within the darkness of his challenges. This section was modeled after Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy, a procedure that is used for trauma victims.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy

EMDR is a form of psychotherapy treatment used to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories first created by Francine Shapiro in 1987 (Shapiro, 2001). While studying trauma, Shapiro noted the disappearance of symptoms after a particular type of eye movement treatment. Researchers continue to investigate the connection between EMDR and Rapid Eye Movement (REM) that occurs during sleep. Similarly, information is processed when an individual falls asleep and enters into REM. This is the stage when a person dreams. Researchers have concluded that when the eyes are stimulated in a back and forth manner, the brain is able to process information at an accelerated rate (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

EDMR treatment can be approached in a few different ways. The basic requirement is the activation of the eyes in a bilateral coordination. This could be achieved through electronic lights blinking on and off. Additionally, tactile stimulation could be incorporated in the form of vibrating handheld devices. Lastly, audio stimulation of vibrations could be layered to further stimulate recall.

Considering the theatrical production that goes into facilitating this treatment, I was inspired to bring in this aesthetic into the story both visual and audibly. Mimicking the visual and auditory aesthetics of EDMR treatment, *The Ordeal in the Hero's Journey* utilized the use of LED glasses that lit up to replicate the REM stimulator. Audibly, a female voice played from a tape player that asked the hero the same prompts an EDMR facilitator would ask. Between prompts, the sounds of pulsating vibrations were also played. During this section a monologue recounting specific moments of trauma were shared that eventually progressed to memories of strength and empowerment. This progressive gradation of emotions from dysfunctional recall to positive experiences is stylistic of the EDMR process.

The Reward (Seizing the Sword)



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Ricardo Alvarez.

10

Explanation: The hero takes possession of the treasure won by facing death. There may be celebration, but there is also danger of losing the treasure again.

In Context: As the work starts towards its conclusion, America hands the hero an object that serves as a metaphor for a new beginning and empowers the hero to move forward in his journey. The last question asked of the hero by the woman on the tape player is to describe his “safe place.” The hero describes a place of warmth and sunlight; a place that is familiar to him. As he continues to describe this place, America approaches the hero, deactivates the tape player, and awards him with a new gift; the staff used to hit the piñata during the Crossing of the Threshold. America instructs the hero to show the audience his safe place and expresses her belief in his ability. The hero takes the staff and from it rolls out a large paper path across the floor; there is a feeling of advancement and enlightenment. Neither the audience nor hero knows what will be gained from traveling down this path, but the need to discover that answer is felt.

The Road Back



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Ricardo Alvarez.

11

Explanation: The hero is driven to complete the adventure, leaving the Special World to be sure the treasure is brought home. Often a chase scene signals the urgency and danger of the mission.

In Context: Here, the hero presents his metaphoric path to resolution. It is a path that spans across the performance space that figuratively directs the hero out of the Special World. The hero progresses down the paper strip as audio of waves begins to play. He is tasked to show the audience what home is, where is it he feels safe. The pathway is clear but the journey is uncertain. Accompanying the hero is a single balloon that has been his companion through the entire story. Together they venture down the pathway, intertwining through movement; it is a representation of wholeness. It is obvious where the hero will go but the clarity of his intentions is vague. At one moment, he steps off the paper pathway and approaches the audience. He acknowledges their company and gestures a sense of togetherness. It is a sentimental and meaningful gesture he carries back to the paper trail and continues down the path.

The Resurrection



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring Ricardo Alvarez.

12

Explanation: The hero is severely tested once more on the threshold of home. He or she is purified by a last sacrifice, another moment of death and rebirth, but on a higher and more complete level. By the hero's action, the polarities that were in conflict at the beginning are finally resolved.

In Context: In the next to last section of the work, the hero arrives at the end of his path and disrobes as a symbolic reflection of the abandonment of his former self and insecurities. Upon arriving to the edge of the paper, the hero is presented with a decision –to stop at the end of the road or continue forth off of the road into open space. He chooses to move forward and goes through a purification ritual of disrobing. As he begins to remove each article of clothing, he patiently gestures a sort of baptism action. He progresses from a crawl, to a walk, to standing, much like his evolution during the Refusal of the Call, only this time he steps towards the calling. With poised strength he stands, slowly drawing in close the floating balloon overhead, and takes his helium companion shaped in the form of a star into his arms with a warm embrace. The hero has arrived to a resolution. The sounds of waves have dissipated and the audience and hero share the space in silence. The moment is subtle, poetic, and peaceful. The lights then fade to black.

Return with the Elixir



Photo by Tim Trumble featuring the cast of *It's My Party*.

13

Explanation: The hero returns home or continues the journey, bearing some element of the treasure that has the power to transform the world as the hero has been transformed.

In Context: In the concluding scene, the hero returns to the introductory scene dressed as a newly constructed person in a new costume, awarded to him by his mentor, America, upon exiting the Special World. The last section of the story is a celebration of the hero's journey and transformation and is a return to the beginning, the birthday party. He is consulted one last time by America who continues to present the hero an array of metaphoric gifts that represent the success and achievement the hero has accomplished during his journey. The last gift the hero receives is a song performed by America and chorus. The video projections reengage and the space returns to the opening birthday dance. This declarative moment is the signifier of the return back to the Ordinary World. The hero returns back to birthday party with a clearer understanding of his identity that is both empowered and whole. At the end of the dance, the hero addresses the audience to express gratitude for their support and encourages everyone to love themselves, because that is truly one of the greatest loves of all.

The narrative structure of the Hero's Journey provides a framework to assist in the analyzing of the content and composition of *It's My Party*. By dividing the narrative of *It's My Party* into the twelve phases of the Hero's Journey, the theatrical framework of the work is articulated by the continuous shifts between each phase through dynamics, content, and artistry. These abrupt changes are reflective of the complexity that surrounds the issues of accepting one's HIV diagnosis, disclosing to others, and overcoming HIV stigma. The continuous shifts gave the audience opportunity to confront these issues or allowed space for them to draw their own connection between the story and their own assumptions of what the HIV condition might be like. The benefit of applying this structure to the narrative of *It's My Party* was that it relieves when both the hero and audience begin to transform and re-assimilate with new values and understanding.

The scenario of a birthday party allowed audience members to engage with the subject of HIV through a humorous instead of a tragic entry point. As the story developed, both the audience and hero navigated contrasting emotional depths in content, storytelling, and dance. This connection between the audience and hero was established by dissolving the forth wall through audience interaction and an immersive environment, which heavily influenced creating an impacting experience for the audience. As the hero transformed so did the audience, as they were situated in an environment to experience emotional transformation through an intimate connection to the hero.

Inherent to the Hero's Journey is transformation, which is pivotal in providing an opportunity to create new understandings of how HIV effects the newly diagnosed in today's society. Through the use of this structure, the audience experiences this transformation as they travel with the hero from the Ordinary World, to a Special World,

and return back to the Ordinary World. This is metaphoric of the audience abandoning their preconceived notions of what the HIV+ person is like. When they venture into the Special World, both the hero and audience are forced to question themselves and address their own insecurities, doubts, and fears regarding HIV. Once addressed and resolved, both parties can move forward towards a new disposition of enlightenment with the truths they have learned. By overcoming these fears, transformation occurs and both hero and audience are able to move beyond stigma and approach HIV with empathy.

Restorative Narratives

While developing the work, it was important to share insight into the underrepresented HIV community through a story focused on an actual human story instead of approaching the content in a scientific or statistical manner. This type of journalism has been referred to as a restorative narrative (Tenore, 2015).

Unlike news stories that focus on destruction, death counts, or collateral damage, restorative narratives are a genre of stories that focus on the recovery, restoration, and resilience in the aftermath or in the midst of difficult times (Tenore, 2015). Trademarks of these narratives are: they focus on the emotional terrain of a situation, they are concerned with the progression of a situation, and they help teach empathy by presenting universal truths. There is a level of authenticity and truth to these stories. They factor in the time needed to restore a troubled scenario. These storylines focus on the strength of their characters that help them through adversity.

It's My Party is an abstract autobiographical restorative narrative that follows a Hero's Journey structure. Because the story is rooted in non-fiction and is focused on the recovery of the hero, the performance shined a light of hope upon the subject of HIV, rather than present it as at tragedy. Contrary to many contemporary dance works that

focus on the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic, *It's My Party* is embedded with the trademarks of a restorative narrative with its focus on the journey towards empowerment and self-acceptance.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTION: DISCOVERIES THROUGH THE PROCESS

*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.”*

Marcel Proust, Novelist

6

I have always been thankful to have an artistic point of view that pulls from multiple cultural and artistic perspectives. My work as a former dance company member of a world-renowned Asian American modern dance company, an active artistic researcher, and a seasoned graphic designer contribute to my unique artistic lens and ability to tell stories through various means of communication. Taking on the challenge to address both a personal and stigmatized topic has been one of the most daring, inspiring, and triumphant pursuits in my artistic career. Through the creative process of making and performing *It's Not My Party*, I gained an in depth understanding into the complex subject of HIV stigma. As I reflect on my artistic evolution through this production, I return to my initial questions of inquiry.

Q. How do I make the subject of HIV (stigma) tangible and assessable?

Through the course of this production, I noted that allowing people time to process their understanding of the subject of HIV and their relationship to the HIV+ person was beneficial. As Erving Goffman (1959) addressed in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he looks at the complexities involved during social interactions. He believes that we project “controlled information” about ourselves onto others, which are conscious pieces of information that are catered to the recipient’s interests and

values. In a way, these are superficial identifiers. At the same time, during these interactions, recipients are interpreting the information they are receiving and systematically processing them against their own value systems. Goffman (1959) viewed this through a metaphoric dramaturgical lens, based on the idea that social interactions are like theatrical performances and people are like actors. I found this analysis of human interaction to be present when initially disclosing one's HIV+ diagnosis to someone who is HIV negative. My leading assumption was that the topic of HIV was a foreign subject for most people in an educational and/or emotional manner in a face-to-face encounter; therefore time was needed to process this new information.

It was also my belief that the tone and context for which the subject of HIV was addressed was critical to the assimilation of information. To discuss the subject of HIV in a medical or statistical manner would contextualize the subject in a stale and insensitive manner. Yet, to approach the subject through charm and metaphor could disarm an audience's precautions and invite them into an open-minded state of learning and compassion. Therefore, a central theme revolving around the concept of birthdays was intentionally designed to disarm the audience of any prohibiting disposition, through humor and theatrical spectacle, to win their trust and openness before the subject of HIV was explored. Once the subject was addressed and the protagonist's HIV+ status was disclosed to the audience, moments of abstraction and stillness were brought into the work in order to grant audience members time to process all the pieces of information they had received. Within this production, I found that the best way to approach the subject of HIV and HIV stigma was through metaphors and allowing the audience time to make the connections between metaphor and meaning.

Q. How to do I convey transformation and empowerment in performance?

I discovered that in order to convey transformation, the narrative structure first needed to invest in character development. I chose this approach so that the audience established sympathy and connection with the character. Once that was established, a deconstruction and reconstruction of the protagonist's identity through challenges allowed the viewer the opportunity to witness growth within the character. I believe that the Hero's Journey provides the perfect narrative structure to convey this sense of transformation. This was also conveyed through the continual change in scenic design through video projections, props, and staging. Similar to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the protagonist's identity, the space was reimagined with new purpose and concepts. Throughout the production, many objects went through their own metaphysical reassignment to assist the protagonist in his transition towards his reconstructed self.

Along with an intuitive narrative structure built for transformation, the scripting of a restorative narrative tone further catapults the structure towards an empowering storyline. Commonly focusing on the restoration after tragedy, a restorative narrative seeks to reveal meaningful progression and universal truths that touch on the human connection (Tenore, 2015). The marriage of both storytelling styles ensured that audiences are lead to new insights and meaning through the performing arts.

Q. How do I connect with audiences?

Engaging with the audience was critical to the production and was achieved through staging, storytelling, and the seating arrangement. Placing the performance space inside of parliament-style seating (having audience members face each other flanking opposite sides of the performance space) created a confrontational visual field

between audience members. With the absence of the fourth wall, which typically separates the audience from the performance, the audience could recognize themselves and each other as being present and accountable during the performance rather than passive observers. This established a sense of equal vulnerability between the audience and performers.

In order to connect with audiences, a performer must be authentic and truthful in performance. As Brown (2012) has identified in her research, one has to be vulnerable in order to receive empathy. As well, in order to overcome shame one has to combat the toxic ingredients that feed it—secrecy, silence, and judgment. Since the intent of the production was to help audiences empathize with the challenges of overcoming stigmatization, it was necessary to include clear monologues performed by the protagonist. Goffman (1959) might address the expression of vulnerability through his concept of the front and back stage areas. To Goffman (1959), the “front stage” is where the social interaction occurs in some sort of public domain. When the actor enters into the “backstage,” he or she enters into a place of security from the public eye. It is a place where the actor can strip his or her mask and act as his or her authentic self. Considering the performance space did not include a distinct front stage or backstage area, the protagonist was always in a state of exposed vulnerability with his public and private thoughts both on display of the audience. As the protagonist showed the audience this vulnerability, he demonstrated authenticity, which connected audiences to the psyche and emotional well-being of the protagonist.

Q. How do I “talk” about HIV and not “preach” about it?

There are three elements that sustained the audience’s attention throughout the production: the pacing, the division of information, and tonality. The continual and

abrupt changes in the landscape of the show were not only symbolic of the protagonist's journey of transformation, but were intended to refresh the audience's attention by forcing them to recalibrate their understanding of the environment, metaphoric symbolism, plot points, and concept. Since the story wove several storylines and metaphoric symbols together, each shift in content required the audience to make connections between these juxtaposing concepts. This approach was reflective of the double entendre concept behind birthdays. In a way, the story was a three-dimensional cube that was constantly flipping. Each face of the cube commented on a different side of birthdays, life, death, decisions, destiny, etc. Scenes typically lasted between five-eight minutes. When strung together, the theatrical dynamic range oscillated between high intensity to lower intensity, which was conveyed through color, movement, soundtrack, and spoken word. The diversification of information through metaphors and abrupt quick scene changes broke the viewers' attention span into smaller increments, which kept the subject of HIV and HIV stigma easy to process.

The literal visual focus of the protagonist while delivering his monologues and his vocal tone were both pivotal to connecting with the audience. The script was written from a conversational point of view rather than in a medical or statistical manner. The protagonist began to engage with audience members in a formal tone at the beginning of the production and the monologues slowly began to unravel into an informal tone as the production progressed. This represented the protagonist's emotional uncertainty. Furthermore, the monologues were either spoken to select audience members with direct focus or were spoken aloud to the general public with a soft focus. The soft focus usually correlated to the sharing of internal feelings or thoughts. Playing with one's vocal range when talking about the subject of HIV and being conscious of making eye contact with an audience are both effective ways to keep the conversation casual and accessible.

Another element that assisted in storytelling was the use of metaphoric objects. They not only represented transformation, but their meanings brought new interpretations to the various themes of the work. For example, accompanying the protagonist throughout his journey was a star shaped helium balloon. The reference to stars was written into the script at numerous points from a cosmic interpretation to sayings such as “reaching for the stars” or symbolically interpreted as a guiding light from above. At the end of the protagonist’s journey, America brings new meaning to the balloon by identifying that, “you are never alone. You always have your friends and family where ever you go,” as she draws a smiley face on the balloon. By literally marking new meaning upon the balloon, the object and its relation to the protagonist is transformed into a meaningful relationship symbolizing wholeness, community, and support. Through the use of these metaphors, audiences are able to learn about the multifaceted issues around HIV stigma through their own interpretations rather than through a lecture format.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE NEXT STORY

“Life is a journey, not a destination.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalist Poet

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Although I have always considered myself an abstract and conceptual artist, clarity in message and concept are of utmost importance to me. I have found this to be especially true in regards to combating HIV stigma. Through this project, I discovered that authenticity, openness, and the willingness to be vulnerable are necessities to gain the understanding and empathy of others. This is where narrative stories that are rooted in open dialogues about the challenges become meaningful.

What I have discovered about myself as an artist through this process is that I have a multi layered interested in storytelling that calls upon the artistic convergence of diverse disciplines. Aesthetically, I am drawn to durational work that allows the audience time to marinate within the concept of the work. This allows me the opportunity to play with the rhythm, pacing, and flow of a storyline. Universally, my work has always derived from my own personal history or observations. Conceptualizing, developing, and executing this applied project has sparked my artistic interests in continuing to invest in creating work focused on social justice and telling the stories of underrepresented populations and their perspectives. More specifically, in my personal journey with my HIV+ diagnosis, I have come to understand more deeply the social and personal challenges that one faces in finding their acceptance in society as well as what the generational differences are between people who lived through the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980’s and those born in today’s world of modern medicine where HIV/AIDS is no longer a “death sentence.” Yet, the question remains, why is it so feared and stigmatized?

To this day HIV discrimination based on stigmatization still exists in the US and globally. As I move forward as an artist, I see that I am concerned with making work that can do some social good for others. I am interested in continuing to demystify what the HIV+ identity looks like today through artistic advocacy that includes performance, video art, and public speaking. Along with educating the greater populous of what the HIV+ profile looks like today, my greater hope is to help those who feel disempowered because of their HIV+ status stand up and feel unashamed of who they are. An HIV+ person who is adherent to their medication is not the threat to society. Stigma is.

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