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AIDS AND ART IN AMERICA

Carrie McGourty

The Disease in the New York Art Community

Today, December 1, 2003, is Global AIDS Day in New York City. As masses of people pour out of the subway and onto the busy streets of the city, it's hard to grasp the reality of the epidemic: forty-two million people worldwide have AIDS, and 16 percent of them live in New York City.¹

The large numbers reveal themselves in the cityscape. In midtown Manhattan, technicians set the stage at the Nederlander Theater for the Broadway play, *Rent*, a rock opera that captures the essence of the artistic bohemia of the Lower Eastside, a culture that experienced the destruction of AIDS in the 1990s. The numbers also reveal themselves in individual people like Jose Luis Cortes, who prepares for another day of artistic creation in Harlem. This day is another reminder of the fewer moments left before he expires. He's lived with HIV for 12 years.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is caused by a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus.) As the HIV disease continues, it slowly wears down the immune system. Although there is still no known cure, medication introduced in the 1990s greatly reduced the number of casualties in the United States by slowing down the process of HIV, even though for many other infected persons in poor areas around the world, limited availability of medication results in thousands of deaths.

In the United States, about 800,000 to 900,000 people are HIV-positive. More than 300,000 people are living with AIDS. Each year, there are about 40,000 new infections. These numbers are small in comparison to the number of infections in continents such as Africa and South America, but they are still significant medical issues in the U.S.²

For many in New York City, art is the forum in which the complete tragedy of the destruction of AIDS is presented and discussed. Often considered the “modern plague,” the disease inspires expression for many performers and artists to document and discuss the brutal destruction of AIDS. The artists that actually live with AIDS or HIV refuse to be labeled as “victims”; they allow the disease to motivate them to create great work before their death. Their muse is time.

*Portrait of an Artist: Jose Luis Cortes*³

Jose Luis Cortes's life changed at 28. Up until that point, he enjoyed the carefree lifestyle of his youth in Puerto Rico and planned to work at his family's store. Then an article published in *The New York Times* in 1981 described a “gay cancer,” an unexplained sickness that infected many North American travelers, and Cortes knew he might be sick.

The medical and science world later discovered that the sickness they believed to be “gay cancer” was actually HIV, or AIDS. Cortes tested HIV positive and immediately grasped his mortality. Knowing that he faced death, he gave up his humble aspirations to take over his family's store and pursued his true passion: art. After taking a few art classes at the University of Puerto Rico, he moved to New York City to live his dream.

He could only afford a run down apartment in Harlem, but Cortes set to work. His first works focused on numerous self-portraits, illustrated with black and white acrylic paint on *The New York Times* newspapers. One critic wrote that these portraits allowed the artist “to find himself and position himself assertively within the world. They also served as a source of courage in the light of public indifference towards HIV and AIDS.”⁴

His work also featured documentation of the Times Square area before it was gentrified, illustrating the façades of porno movie theatres, strip clubs and adult video stores. The subjects in his paintings are simple, but are of evident importance to the artist. People and places Cortes encountered were the focus of many of his works.

Interview With the Artist:

CM: What influence does AIDS have on your art?

JLC: The effect that AIDS has on my art is that it makes me feel like I had a timetable, and I didn't want to waste time. I didn't want to work in the store with my family; I wanted to do something that would fulfill me, or leave a mark.

CM: What do you hope people will realize or grasp from your paintings?

JLC: Just that through my eyes of looking at the world, they will see the world in a different way and appreciate everyday life. I hope that people take from my work the same thing I would take from other artists'. It just takes me to another place. When you look at a work it moves you; I hope it moves other people.

CM: Why do you think art is so important in modern society?

JLC: We are creative beings by nature, and we are the only living beings that do art. So it's something unique to humans. Some people don't have the appreciation for art and they think art is just likeness. If you create a likeness of a car, or a person, then that's perfect. But it's not just that.

CM: How would your life be different if you were not HIV positive?

JLC: At the beginning when I found out, I was just envious of people that could live carefree and didn't worry about getting sick. Everybody's going to die—that's universal. But at the time there were no medicines, so I was envious of people who lived carefree. But if you look at it in another way, I think I live more now because I have a sense of time.

CM: What influence has AIDS had on the art world?

JLC: It's important to collect the voices of the people who are living through this now because in the future it can be studied. It's like the Holocaust. Anything that happened in history is studied through art and photography. It's a way of life, looking back at what happened and keeping it present.

*Larson and Link: "One Song, Glory"*⁵

When *Rent* opened on Broadway, the positive reaction was colossal. Not only was the play a unique voice in a chorus of bright lights and showy plots, but also it was a cry from the counter culture to acknowledge issues resonating with the modern world.

Jonathon Larson created the story, inspired by the bohemian lifestyle and characters he encountered while living in New York City's East Village. *Rent* is about a community celebrating life, in the face of death and AIDS, at the turn of the Century;⁶ Larson explained to a friend.

Larson died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm the night before *Rent* opened and never saw the tremendous success and impact his show had on the world. It won numerous awards, including the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Tony Award and New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical.⁷ Larson's passing was parallel to one of the main themes of the show: that life should be celebrated because tomorrow isn't promised.

Currently on Broadway, Ryan Link plays Roger, a character who has AIDS. Each night, Link performs "One Song Glory," the bitter and desperate cry of Roger to fulfill his goal of writing one song before AIDS claims his life. Link studied mathematics and computer science at the University of Washington in his hometown of Seattle and worked as a technical support engineer in software companies before leaving his conventional life to pursue his passion of performing. In 2001, he came to New York City and filed for

unemployment while auditioning. He was cast for the national tour of *AIDA* and then landed the role of Roger in fall, 2003.

Interview With the Artist, Ryan Link:

CM: What drew you to the role of Roger?

RL: I auditioned for both Mark and Roger, but I related closer to Roger for the blatant rock star qualities. I enjoy singing my face off. I have the aspect of the frustrated songwriter, but I don't have the urgency to leave one song behind or feel I need to have an impact.

CM: To portray a struggling artist destined to die, who or what is your muse?

RL: Love is my muse. Love is what saves Roger from hopelessness: knowing he can care about someone other than himself and take someone into his ego. He loves Mimi, and that's what makes him realize he can keep living. The characters with AIDS believe in love despite knowing they're going to die.

CM: What central role does AIDS, HIV, play in the production?

RL: Half the characters in *Rent* have HIV or AIDS and are confronted with the reality that they could die any day. The setting of the play with no drugs available brings a real immediacy into their lives. Some take it in stride more than others. The central conflict between Mimi and Roger is AIDS. Roger is angry that something is taken away and feels like he will never be the star he wants to be. Mimi wants to enjoy every day as much as possible and tries to bring Roger out of his shell; he wants to write one song before he expires.

CM: What is the meaning and significance of "One Song Glory"?

RL: "One Song Glory" is a powerful song about leaving a mark on the world. Roger knows he's on the timeline and goes back and forth between that sense of hope and being able to deliver one song with the despair of dying. It's an internal struggle between creation and destruction.

CM: What do you think Jonathon Larson hoped to accomplish with this play?

RL: He wanted us to love each other, accept each other's differences and live for today and to appreciate the non-mainstream aspects of society. Any life-threatening disease can bring awareness; AIDS happens to be the most deadly disease of the moment. I hope that it opens some people's minds who thought AIDS patients were the underclass, the unworthy, the people who deserved to die anyway. I hope it makes them realize there are homeless and junkies that make valuable contributions to society.

Awareness and celebration within the AIDS community and society

Whether a character on stage, or a catalyst that drives an artist to work faster, AIDS is an important influence on the art world and is unique to this generation. The significance of art in the modern culture is illustrated by the works of Jose Luis Cortes and Jonathon Larson, who dedicated their lives to enlightening society through the eyes of individuals from different walks of life. In addition to bringing awareness, they teach us the importance of seizing every moment by celebrating life. 

Notes

1. WABC News (New York City), "World AIDS Day," news broadcast, December 1, 2003.
2. Statistics taken from the "AIDS Fact Sheets" provided by AIDS.ORG, <http://www.aids.org> (accessed January 4, 2003).
3. Interview conducted on December 11, 2003.
4. Rudi C. Bleys, *Images of ambiente: homotextuality and Latin American art, 1810-today* (London; New York: *Continuum*, 2000).
5. Interview conducted on December 13, 2003.
6. "About the show—The History of Rent," <http://www.siteforrent.com> (accessed November 15, 2003).
7. Gregory Beals, "The World of 'Rent,'" *Newsweek*, May 13, 1996.