

sins with all my heart:
Autobiography and Performance as Activist Intervention

By

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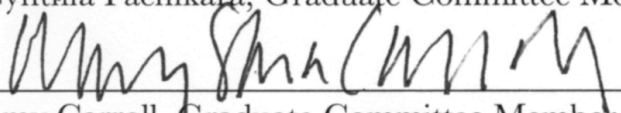
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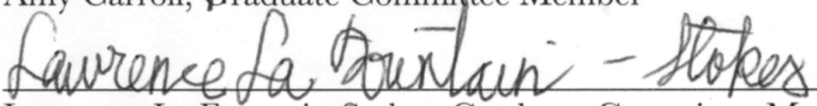
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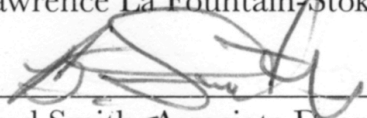
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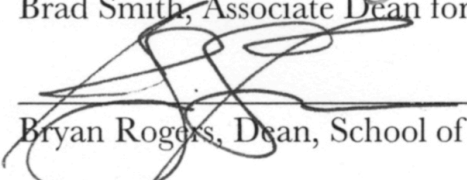

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Abstract

sins with all my heart is a live solo autobiographical performance exploring contemporary themes of gay identity, HIV/AIDS, spirituality, community, and social surveillance that uses confession as a metaphoric framing device. In this M.F.A. thesis document, the performance is contextualized within the aesthetic and narrative concerns of queer solo autobiographical performance. This paper discusses the motivating factors behind the work, and describes how autobiographical performance can engage the broader social issues of a community.

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How this thesis is organized

Following this introduction, I include a brief section describing two of my previous projects that I think are relevant to my thesis work. Then, I present the creative and thematic context for the performance. Next, I present the script of *sins with all my heart* as it was performed on March 16 and 17, 2007. The script includes the full text monologue annotated with stage directions, visual and sound cues, and still photographs from the performance. Following the script, the discussion section further contextualizes and interprets the performance, both visually and conceptually. Finally, the conclusion draws out questions of audience, and synthesizes some of the overarching themes of this thesis. The digital version of this thesis document includes a complete video document of the performance. The reader can view the video in concert with this essay to have an integrated understanding of the creative work.

Project Background (Motives, Methods, Materials)

Motives

As I began the writing process for *sins with all my heart*, I explored several motivating themes. First, I wanted to explore how two very rich cultural traditions and vocabularies, Catholicism and gay identity, collided into, commented upon, and merged into each other, informing my contemporary personal experience. I wanted to show how secular gay rituals (like going out to the dance club each weekend) had become just as, if not more important than, the religious rituals of my Catholic childhood, and how my own secular spirituality is a hybrid of these various rituals. My intention was to stage an accumulation of identities, a collage that would complicate a simple narrative trajectory from one oppressive (Catholic, closeted) identity to a different liberating (gay, agnostic) identity. In the fantasy world of this performance, Catholicism and gay identity could become entangled in complex, sometimes comical, and sometimes tragic ways. Although I have made intellectual decisions to resist the institutions I experience as oppressive, those intellectual decisions do not completely erase the imprint of those institutions upon me. My writing explored how institutions shape our identities, how surveillance functions as a mechanism of power, and how choice and personal agency are constructed within this context. At some point, my invoking Catholicism in this narrative became more metaphorical than literal—Catholicism standing in for uniformity.

Next, I found myself writing about two kinds of physical spaces: “private little rooms” (the confessional, the closet, the bedroom, the bathhouse cubicle, the counseling room) and large public spaces of “worship” (the cathedral, the dance club, the bathhouse). The “private little rooms” were all potential sites for transformation. The large public spaces served as sites for demonstrating belonging to a particular community (Catholic, gay, sexual). These sites contest the boundaries of public and private, chosen spaces and compulsory spaces, and elicit the broader questions: how are notions of private and public constructed? In what ways do privacy and publicness construct our experiences of identity?

Last, I began to consider what it means to write an autobiographical narrative of HIV/AIDS in the contemporary moment, 2007, twelve years after antiretroviral drugs

and combination therapy have dramatically changed the experience of HIV/AIDS for middle class gay men. My intention was to create a narrative about negotiating sexual pleasure, safety, enjoyment, and risk. The gay men of my generation, men in their late twenties and early thirties and younger, have always lived in a world with HIV/AIDS and safer sex practices. However, many have experienced moments of personal crisis when they fail to consistently exercise safer sex practices. For many, these personal crises are no longer experienced within the context of a communal crisis (as in the 1980s and early 1990s). Along with the usual feelings of guilt and shame, is the feeling that “we should know better.” These risky incidents illuminate the tricky relationship between HIV education, sexual practice, and sexual desire. I realize this is territory to tread delicately. The severe loss, sadness, and anger of the AIDS crisis still linger for those who experienced it. Competing notions around how to even describe the current state of the AIDS epidemic for gay men have created a moment of intense discursive and pragmatic confusion. This confusion has had real-life consequences for young gay men who, as a group, have shown increases in HIV diagnoses (Krisberg 6).

My desire to confront these issues grows out of my personal experience with this palpable confusion: should I see HIV as a crisis (as some argue) or, simply, as a fact of life (as others argue)? Are the intense feelings of panic (as I describe in this performance) warranted in relationship to the minimally risky sex I describe? From where does that intense panic come—from HIV prevention discourses? From my own internalized homophobia?

Some might suggest that this narrative is simply a tale from what people in public health call the “worried-well.” But, as one self-help text for gay men indicates, “HIV is always present psychologically [for seronegative men], even when it is absent in reality (Mancilla & Troshinsky, 123).” I wanted to stage a contemporary experience of being presumably HIV-negative, and then experiencing a moment of HIV indeterminacy. Though the focus is on autobiographical experience, the narrative uses autobiography to touch on the broader concern of how HIV/AIDS discourses have shifted since 1995. I think of this performance in relationship to other performances about HIV/AIDS, most of which were created during the period before 1995 or narrate that period. In this crucial moment of discursive flux, as theatre historian David Román suggests, performances like mine can attempt “interventions” into the ways in which dominant discourses of HIV/AIDS are constructed (Román 43), and I am interested in this piece having a resonance within the imagined community of young gay men. I believe that staging my narrative (and others like it) contributes to a continuing dialogue around HIV/AIDS.

Methods

In the year preceding this project, I found myself writing and directing more than I was performing. As a result, I felt the urge to use this thesis performance as an opportunity to return to solo performance. I knew it would be a challenge to rebuild my performance endurance at the same time that I was writing and producing the project, but I felt excited by that challenge.

The project began as a text. I created a set of autobiographical stories that focused on memories of growing up Catholic, and another set of stories that reflected on the contemporary moment; some were journal entries, some were long rants or stream-of-

consciousness lists, and some were designed around pieces of music I wanted to put in the show. After substantial editing and revising, I chose the stories that I thought would work best together. A lot of material ended up on the cutting room floor, but what remained is the narrative foundation of this performance.

My relationship to humor as a performance strategy was complicated by this project. In some of my past works, I have used humor as the primary performance strategy. I began the writing process for *sins with all my heart* by engaging my own camp sensibility to tap into the camp practice of juxtaposing the fabulous and the abject, and of finding the laugh line in even the most painful of experiences. Yet, simultaneously, I was urged by my colleagues and collaborators to find different narrative textures that allowed for vulnerability in the piece. In my most recent work (before *sins*), I had begun to explore a narrative voice that was more serious and straightforward. I found that, for me, the self-protective strategies of camp humor didn't always lead to an aesthetics of vulnerability. As I continued to immerse myself in the narrative, I realized, too, that I was dealing with some very personal discomforts around my own spirituality, sexuality, and mortality, and that some parts of this narrative would create an experience of discomfort for an audience. I wanted to restage the double-edged nature of these experiences by balancing the aesthetics of the campy and the earnest, and of the humorous and the serious. The resulting narrative weaved a complex web of light and dark humor, melodrama and realistic drama, and comedy and tragedy.

I am the kind of performer who responds enthusiastically to music. My training in musical taught me to treat music as a respected partner in a scene. I wanted to use this to my advantage in dealing with the more serious moments of *sins*. From the beginning, I made a calculated effort to intersperse snippets of song into the narratives. These musical theatre moments often lend a comedic element to the performance.

I worked on several video experiments, both animation and live action, to be included in the piece. At the beginning of the project, I believed that video would play a major role in this performance. Yet, as the editing and feedback processes unfolded, I hadn't found exactly the right video concept. Questions emerged about the purpose of video elements (particularly over whether they were crucial to the piece), and, since I felt that I had not discovered the right integration of video for this show by the time rehearsals began, I eliminated all video except the animated eyes.

By the end of the fall semester, I had amassed about ninety pages of text—far too much for one show. Thus, the editing process began. I shared the texts with my committee and other colleagues and read the texts aloud in order to choose which narratives would be revised and staged for the show.

In the six weeks leading up to the premier, this project became a much more collaborative effort. I met with Jacques Mesereau, the technical director of the theatre, to design a lighting plan for the show. Soon after, Erin Markey arrived to direct and stage the show. During four weeks of intensive rehearsal, we discovered what things worked and didn't work onstage, and the script received another revision. We continued to develop the lighting concept, and made crucial decisions about staging, costuming, and sound design. Together, we took the show off the page and onto the stage.

Materials

At the heart of this project are my body and my stories. As a solo autobiographical performer, I use text, movement, speech, song, and sound as the building blocks of my work. For *sins*, I kept physical objects in the space to a minimum—only a clothing rack, my costumes, and a chair. I made a decision, at the urgings of my colleagues, to focus on creating a lighting concept that could shape the amorphous stage into smaller, more precise spaces. Lighting became crucial in demarcating a variety of physical spaces on the stage that could instantly materialize and dematerialize. I wanted the spaces I described in the performance to be constructed through my imaginary instead of through scenery. Erin and I treated the stage as an extension of my mind, a place of memory, fantasy, and fluidity—a place where anything is possible. From a formal standpoint, these choices facilitated quick transitions between scenes and a consistent narrative momentum. As for costuming, we assembled a plethora of navy blue pants and white shirts. Each new outfit would be a variation on the theme of “Catholic Schoolboy,” beginning with the most mundane outfit and ending with the most fabulous.

Previous Work

Before I lay out the creative precedents for *sins with all my heart*, I want to briefly discuss the two works I made just before beginning my thesis work. The first is a collaborative video performance called *The Boyfriend* (which I directed and co-wrote) and the second is an experimental narrative video called *dance or die*. In certain ways, these works foreshadowed the narrative tone and themes of *sins with all my heart*.

The Boyfriend follows a young man, Ricky, as he visits the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library. While exploring the archive, he becomes captivated by a photograph of a young man in drag from the 1930s. He imagines that the man in the photograph is his boyfriend or perhaps it's him in another life. He fantasizes about having a long-distance relationship over time (rather than geographic distance). As the narrative unfolds, Ricky performs a song dressed in drag, suggesting that he might actually be a reincarnation of the figure in the photograph. At the end of the performance, the contemporary Ricky and the drag Ricky meet each other for a brief, mysterious moment.

dance or die unfolds around a montage of tracking shots of an empty Catholic high school and images of Catholic iconography. Through voiceover, the narrator talks about a gay teenager named Doug, who, we learn, has committed suicide. Even though the narrator himself is gay, he discloses his own ironic involvement in Doug's harassment and suggests that he may have contributed to the suicide. In the end, we learn that the narrator received a scholarship from Doug's family after his death. We understand that the video itself is both an act of confession and an act of penance for the narrator's regretful actions.



dance or die (video stills, 2006)



The Boyfriend (stills, 2006)

Both pieces have a complex narrative tone. *The Boyfriend* employs tropes of camp humor (drag performance, lip-syncing to Judy Garland) while tapping into a somber experience of nostalgia. *dance or die* enacts a kind of melodrama, yet explores sincere feelings of grief, regret, mortality, and desire for reconciliation. The works also describe encounters with the uncanny, and attempt to produce an uncanny feeling of déjà vu for the viewer. The lingering past comes to influence the present moment. Although *The Boyfriend* is somewhat lighthearted, Ricky is, after all, strangely fantasizing over a ghost of

a person. And throughout *dance or die*, the narrator speaks to a dead boy from his past, and he uses the empty school to enact a kind of seance. The mingling and confusing of the ghostly past with the present creates a fascinating counterpoint to the lighter elements of the pieces.

I intended for these works, in the most general sense, to stage an intervention into homophobic discourse. More specifically, *The Boyfriend* challenges the ways in which homosexuality and same-sex desire are often obscured by official accounts of history. Ricky's story excavates queer artifacts and queer desire from the academic, sanitized space of an actual archive (the story is set in the Bentley Library, the archive of the University of Michigan). *dance or die* shows how the benign exterior of the high school belies the extreme social control, surveillance, and homophobic violence exerted within. In both pieces, an encounter with a seemingly innocuous place provokes a series of remembrances, analogies, and fantasies that complicate our understanding of the place. The intervention comes by re-reading these places, challenging what we *think* we know about them, and transforming them into sites that facilitate queer narratives.

As I began writing *sins with all my heart*, I set out to explore in greater detail the themes that I had hinted at in these earlier works. I worked towards the tonal complexity of *dance or die* and *The Boyfriend* by simultaneously exploring opportunities for camp humor, as well as vulnerability and pathos. The notion of remembrance, analogy, and fantasy as facilitated by encounters with a specific place became another interest for me. Thus, I was inspired to write about the private little rooms and large public gathering spaces that were significant. Further, *dance or die* proved an important shift towards a more earnest narrative tone in my writing that didn't necessarily employ humor as it's primary narrative strategy.

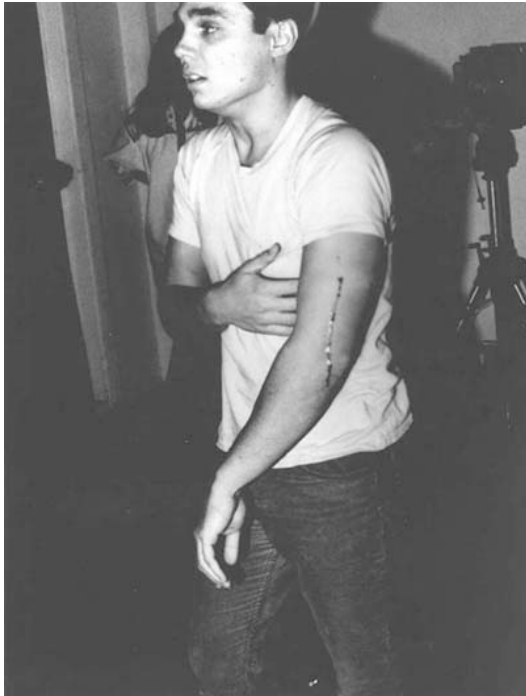
Context

Performance, Autobiography, Queer Performance

sins with all my heart is most readily contextualized within the aesthetic and narrative concerns of queer solo autobiographical performance as it emerged in the 1980's and 1990's. The movement in queer solo autobiographical performance has roots in (1) the avant-garde theatre and body art practices of the 1960's and 1970's, (2) the emergence of the autobiographical monologue as a performance practice, and (3) the social change movements begun in the 1960's.

Avant garde performance companies such as Richard Schechner's Performance Group, the Wooster Group, and Mabou Mines emerged during this time. These companies rejected conventional theatre's aesthetics and its rigid hierarchies. The godlike positions of the playwright and director were undermined by a wide array of collaborative theatre-making approaches. Productions challenged the conventions of psychological realism and complicated the role of the audience. For example, the Wooster Group's *Rhode Island Trilogy* (1975-1978) used Spalding Gray's autobiography texts as the basis for a collaborative "sound-and-movement piece (Aronson, 148)" in which the audience was directly addressed. By displacing the conventional fourth wall, these performances blurred the line between performer and audience. No longer mere spectators, audiences were complicit in the creation of the performance.

The body art movement (which grew primarily out of the visual art world of the 1960's and 1970's and was usually situated within the art gallery) enacted similar challenges to conventional spectatorship. The artist's body was the central focus of the work and became the canvas upon which a variety of actions were performed. One well-known example is Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) in which an audience assembled to watch a sharpshooter shoot Burden in the arm. The audience was presented with "the situation of a real person in real pain (Aronson 169)" and Burden claimed that "all those in the gallery were implicated in this act of self-inflicted violence by their failure to intervene (Warr & Jones 122)." Performances like these questioned the boundary between art as representation of reality and art as actual reality. Another example, Barbara Smith's *Feed Me* (1973), created a similar art/life confusion. Smith installed herself naked in the bathroom of a gallery creating a "boudoir-like space" where "participants were invited to feed the artist and themselves in an exchange of conversation and affection (Warr & Jones 116)." Smith offered this work as a feminist critique by foregrounding and complicating the various feminine roles that women are expected to play. In Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm O* (1974) seventy-two objects (amongst them a gun, scissors, and a razor blade) were placed on a table and the audience was instructed to use the objects on Abramovic as they pleased. Some "concerned spectators" demanded the performance stop six hours later, "all her clothes had been sliced off her body with razor blades, she had been cut, painted, cleaned, decorated, crowned with thorns and had had the loaded gun pressed against her head (Warr & Jones 125)."



Chris Burden, *Shoot* (1971)



Barbara Smith, *Feed Me* (1973)



Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0* (1974)

These “classic” body art projects because they demonstrate some of the central aesthetics and concerns that continue to influence solo performance to this day—mainly the centrality of the individual artist’s body, the direct relationship of the artist to the audience, the audience as participant (both implicitly and explicitly), the sometimes political and activist intentions behind the works, and the confusion of so-called “real life” and art practice that allowed for a range of critiques of identity and authenticity. Smith’s and Abramovic’s performances also represented a broader movement by feminist artists to perform the notion of “the personal is political,” which would continue to have repercussions for artists with marginalized identities. I also mention these works because I think they evoke an aesthetic experience of vulnerability and indeterminance. The body is at its most vulnerable, exposed and unguarded, acted upon as if it were an object. The spectator experiences a cognitive indeterminance questioning if these displays are “real” or “performed” and may be uncertain as to how he should respond.

From these somewhat concurrent movements in avant-garde theatre and body art emerged the solo autobiographical text-based monologue in the late 1970’s. Although many artists were experimenting with the form at the time, several scholars credit Spalding Gray with bringing the monologue to the forefront of performance art (Aronson 157-158; Goldberg, *Performance* 28). Gray’s first monologue, *Sex and Death to the Age 14* (1979), is stylistically straightforward, sometimes journalistic, and recalls his earliest childhood memories. The death of pets, of other animals, and of children, awkward proto-sexual encounters, and memories of being raised as a Christian Scientist are recounted as ordinary but momentous tragedies of coming-of-age. Gray set the bar for intimate storytelling and his signature staging—Gray seated behind a table upon which sits a notebook and a glass of water—established a kind of minimalist aesthetic paradigm for solo autobiographical performance. Solo autobiographical performance would be

“typified by technical and physical simplicity that foregrounded concept and the performer over elaborate scenography or mise en scene (Aronson 158).” The visual minimalism of the form emphasizes the centrality of the performer, the autobiographical text, and the performer’s direct-address relationship with the audience.

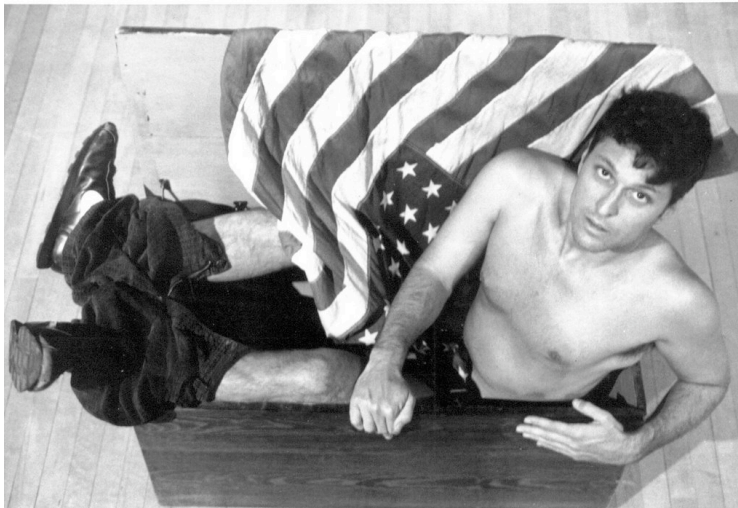


Spalding Gray

Although Gray’s monologues unpack the neuroses of the heterosexual white male psyche, they weren’t particularly or deliberately political. However, the queer autobiographical solo performers that were Gray’s contemporaries infused the monologue with more explicitly political and activist-oriented objectives. These artists took their lead from the social change movements of the late 1960’s and 1970’s (civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation) that encouraged a focus on personal narratives arising “from minorities and marginalized groups, in which they described their social rise along with their personal search for identity (Steiner & Yang, 13).” These types of autobiographical narratives served both as challenges to mainstream discourses on race, gender, and sexuality, and as rallying points around which the communities themselves could be organized and strengthened. Performance artist Holly Hughes writes that queer solo autobiographical performance is rooted in the “particularly American tradition of testifying, of witnessing history in the first person. It’s a tradition that’s entwined with this country’s social change movements (Hughes & Román 2).” Scholars concur that the connection between autobiography and social change influenced the “eruption” of queer solo performance as a powerful form of political activism and community building during the conservative Reagan years (Aronson 178; Goldberg 28). Thus emerged the queer autobiographical performances of artists such as Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, Carmelita Tropicana, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Kate Bornstein, Luis Alfaro, and Michael Kearns. In fact it was these performers, or more accurately their texts, that were my introduction to queer solo performance.

I had heard briefly of Miller and Hughes' Supreme Court case in one of my undergraduate theatre history survey courses, but it wasn't until I discovered Hughes' and David Román's anthology of queer performance, *O Solo Homo*, that I actually encountered their work. After completing my musical theatre B.F.A. I had all but given up on performing, but here I had discovered a performance form that seemed to speak directly to me as a young gay man and as an artist.

Through the intimate details of their autobiographies, these artists explore the geography of queer identity, and that geography goes far beyond the typically superficial paradigm of multiculturalism. Luis Alfaro and Carmelita Tropicana perform the intersection of race, sexuality, and citizenship in their respective works *Downtown* and *Milk of Amnesia*. Alfaro's text tackles racism in general, and, more specifically, challenges the racism within the gay male world. He uses fragments of texts set to musical beats to create a kind spoke-sung poetry. Alina Troyano, a.k.a. Carmelita Tropicana, creates a world populated by over-the-top Latino stereotypes—the exotic nightclub entertainer, the sexist Latino lothario—to explore her experience as a Cuban exile and Latina lesbian. Kate Bornstein's *Virtually Yours Version 2.0* uses the metaphor of computer technology to unpack the technologies of gender. Holly Hughes' *Clit Notes* describes the dysfunction lurking behind white suburban heteronormativity, and positions queer performance as a kind of antidote, a productive form of dysfunction. In *Naked Breath* Tim Miller uses his body to undermine gay male sexual shame amidst the devastation of the AIDS crisis.



Tim Miller



Carmelita Tropicana



Kate Bornstein

These artists have had a crucial impact on my own creative practice, and their works exemplify the aesthetic and conceptual concerns of queer autobiographical performance. By taking a narrativist approach, the works explore and perform identity as intersectionality—overlapping experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The narrativist approach acknowledges the postmodernist tenet that identity is socially and temporally constructed, and resists the notion of essentialized and fixed identities. Identity is seen “not as a *thing* or *object* of any sort, but as an unfolding *story* with certain distinctive features (Guignon 127).” This connects to theories of performativity that view the self as “something we *do*” and construct, rather than something we essentially *are*. These performances stage identity as an ongoing *process* in which we evaluate and interpret the many social roles and contexts that are available to us to form a life story (Guignon 128). And by engaging the performative aspects of identity, these artists acknowledge the agency of individuals to intervene in the processes of compulsory socialization. The autobiographical performance artist is positioned as an intervening agent in systems of oppression by calling attention to how the social construction of identity empowers some and disempowers others.

Stylistically, these performances are generally text-based events. The texts themselves are often irreverent and funny, and employ humor as a strategy for exploring experiences of marginalization. By using humor, the works endeavor to resist becoming sentimentalized “victim” art. Queer solo performers appropriate pop cultural tropes and language to cultivate a highbrow queer poetics within a lowbrow performance form. The narratives of these works are mostly episodic—artists draw from a series of events that share a conceptual or thematic relationship to each other. In the most general sense, all of the performances use queer identity as the central organizing rubric. And then, more specifically, the artists select specific themes or issues that intersect with queer identity, for example, “sex, homophobia, AIDS, coming out, body image, family (Miller & Román 6).” The artist can then mix, match, and juxtapose a variety of stories pertaining to the specifics of the theme. This yields a collage effect in which concept is usually favored over chronology.

These artists draw from traditions of camp humor and drag performance, to create complex moments of great hilarity and great poignancy. Often, they perform identity as “drag” through the creation of stage personae and altar egos. Some create altar egos that are very obviously different from their everyday selves. For example, Alina Troyano performs as Carmelita Tropicana, drawing from the catalogue of hyper-exoticized images of Latina/os in mid-century American media to comment upon North American racial stereotypes. Altar egos may reference certain aspects of the artist’s autobiography, but they allow artists to inhabit other identities in relationship to their autobiographies. Similar to the aesthetics of body art, altar egos blur the boundary between the artist as character and the artist as everyday person questioning notions of the “authentic” and the “fictional.”

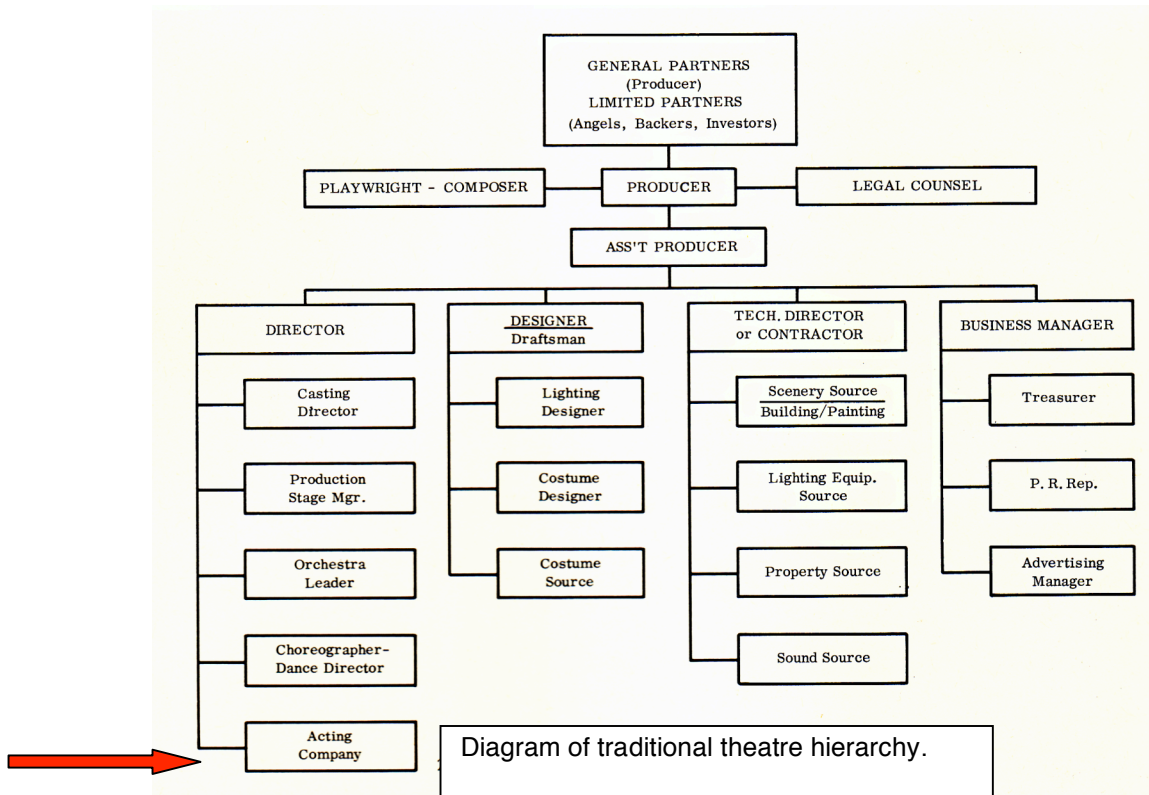
Other performers, like Miller and Hughes, develop stage personae that are nearly indistinguishable from their everyday selves. For the spectator, this creates an interaction “not with characters in a fictional world but with the writer-performer in an intimate theatre (Aronson 180).” This intimate interaction limits “the audience’s ability to avoid the confrontation with the sometimes painful or emotional material (Aronson 180).”

Like the practitioners of body art, queer solo performers put their bodies on the line by identifying themselves as openly and publicly queer within the context of a heterosexist and homophobic culture. Usually they do so more figuratively than literally, but they still risk being attacked by conservative political groups, by the mainstream media, and by local and federal governments (witness the notorious “NEA Four” case), as well as facing threats and actual experiences of physical violence for doing their work.

Remarkably, these works simultaneously enact a critique of heteronormativity *and* a critique of how queers relate to each other within the imagined and actual space of the queer community. The performance space becomes a laboratory for imagining myriad ways of being queer and rehearsing new kinds of social relations (both between queers and between queers and the heteronormative mainstream) (Miller and Román 3-4; Dolan, *Geographies* 105). The community-based and community-identified aspects of queer solo autobiographical performance are a central concern for practitioners. These artists self-consciously position their autobiographies in relationship to the broader concerns of the queer community, and use their narratives to problematize the very notion of community. Indeed, as Tim Miller and David Román argue, queer solo performance works may be most important within the queer community as a kind of ongoing “conversion and transformation” experience that bolsters queer people against the “larger cultural anxiety around queer issues (Miller & Román 9).”

The concerns of queer solo performance that I’ve laid out here are, in the most general sense, the major motivating factors behind my own work. What first drew me to solo performance was its material simplicity and creative egalitarianism. Queer solo performance art is “one of the few areas in public culture that is immediately understood as multiracial, cogendered, and multisexual. It’s also one of the few forms of artistic expression that registers as democratic: nearly anyone can do it and nearly everyone does (Hughes & Román 1).” The do-it-yourself, all-access ethos of solo performance stands in stark contrast to the rigidly hierarchical conventional theatre experiences I had as a musical theatre actor-in-training. I felt alienated by traditional theatre’s overproduced and excessive technical elements, status quo politics, and generally heterosexist worldview. I include here a diagram from a theatre design textbook that shows the complex and rigid hierarchy of conventional theatre-making. Actors, of course, are at the

very bottom of this hierarchy. Additionally, actor training programs (like the one I experienced) are notorious for their anti-intellectualism (Dolan 69), and so I struggled to find a way to combine my intellectual and personal interests in sociology and queer activism with my desire to make performance. As a solo performance artist, I could be whoever I wanted to be in this hierarchy, and I could eliminate some of the roles altogether.



Perhaps most importantly, I would have the freedom to both write about and perform the subject matter most important to me—the complexities of living a queer life. David Román writes, “the categories ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘queer’ are themselves dynamic, subject to the shifting historical forces that help shape these terms and subject to the personal histories that mark any queer individual’s life (Hughes & Román 7).” In my work I strive (like the predecessors I mention here) to stage this dynamism. I often refer to my performances as “archives” because I believe that by capturing and chronicling my own queer life and identity, I also capture (and archive) the contemporary social and political moment. Because of my interest in sociology, I often imagine myself as a participant-observer. But instead of presenting my “findings” in a book or article (like a sociologist or anthropologist would), I use them as the raw material for my script and present them to you as a performance.

By disrupting the conventional theatre hierarchy, I realized too that I would be primarily responsible for the aesthetic aspects of my performances. Influenced by the precedents I have described here, my aesthetic philosophy and practice is to regard the performer’s story (the text), the performer, and his direct relationship with the audience as the central elements of the performance. While I’ve incorporated video into performance

(with varying degrees of success), I continue to gravitate towards a performer-centered aesthetic. For me, this has come to equal an overall visual minimalism in the performance space that is punctuated by carefully chosen moments containing more visually descriptive elements (in the case of *sins* these were costuming choices, lighting, choreography, and a spectacular sequined shirt). The visual minimalism in my work (and in *sins* in particular) refers back to Spalding Gray's simple visual setting, as well as to many of the queer autobiographical solo performers I mention here. For these artists, minimalism is driven in part by practicality (exemplified by a solo artist working with a limited budget, limited access to stage technicians and rehearsal/performance space, the ability of the show to be easily and cheaply transported from one locale to the next) and in part by conceptual concerns (the primacy of the story, body, and voice, a direct relationship with the audience, a rejection of the commodified and routinized practices of conventional theatre). Tim Miller describes this duality well in his writing:

The truth is I prefer to allow the quicksilver imagination of the audience to work with me and make things appear and disappear with the minimum of fuss, muss and shipping fees...My stage space needs to be blank enough so it can serve as a surface on which the audience and I can imagine new social relations (*Body Blows*, introduction xx).

I like Miller's philosophy—trusting and allowing the audience to do some of the visual work through identification and imagination—because I think it's a strategy that keeps the audience engaged as partners in the creation of the performance. I spent the majority of my time developing the script of *sins with all my heart*, and so I relied on this visual philosophy to fill some of the “visual” space.

My general creative philosophy (in relationship to the precedents I identify here) is to create complex text-based autobiographical monologues that engage the complexities of queer identity and queer community. I intend for the works to be activist-oriented, and to engage an actual and imagined queer community. I engage thematically with the notion of intersectionality and identity as a performative practice. I am drawn visually to a minimalist aesthetic. In the tradition of avant-garde theatre, my creative practice seeks to disrupt conventional models of theatre making in order to place the performer's story and body at the center of the work. And, in the tradition of body art as well as the text-based solo monologue, I seek to engage the audience as partners in the performance and complicate the boundary between lived reality and art practice. Again, I want to quote Tim Miller because I think he summarizes these concerns well:

Contrary to the notion that autobiographical storytelling is a closed system, I actually think that when I tell a story about *my* first kiss, the audience knows their main job is to recall the story of their first kiss. The intimacy of the direct-to-the-audience first-person address gives permission for everybody to sift through their inner snapshot album. Free from the totalizing conceit of realistic theater, my telling of my life stories is primarily a challenge for the audience to remember their own narratives (*Body Blows*, introduction xxvi).

Performance and HIV/AIDS

sins with all my heart is also preceded by the concerns of creative works that emerged during the height of the AIDS crisis in the queer community or that chronicle that time—roughly 1980 through 1996. Indeed part of the challenge of making new

work about HIV/AIDS within the queer community is that many of these earlier works seem like both *the* definitive works about HIV/AIDS and *the* definitive experiences of HIV/AIDS—a kind of queer canon, a collection of experiences, narratives, and politics that seem cemented in the past. This feeling of past tense-ness is what encouraged my thinking about telling an updated story about HIV/AIDS that picks up some of threads of these previous works but also attempts to elucidate a contemporary set of individual and social concerns related to HIV/AIDS. *sins with all my heart* endeavors to carve out some space for present tense narratives of HIV/AIDS.

David Román's *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* provides a very comprehensive survey of AIDS-themed performance in the gay community from 1981 to 1996. Román's book describes some of the major concerns of the AIDS crisis for gay men and the performance works that tackled these issues. I draw much of the following information from his survey.

On one hand, AIDS-related performances during this period depicted broad overarching social issues: the refusal of high profile government figures to acknowledge the AIDS crisis, the anti-gay and anti-sex rhetoric of public health and government officials, the lack of and mismanagement of HIV/AIDS research funds, the prolonged research and approval processes for new HIV/AIDS medications, and dominant ideologies that reinforced conceptions of gay men as medical and moral deviants. On the other hand, they depicted more personal experiences from within the gay community: caring for friends and lovers as they got sick and died, attending ACT-UP and other activist protests, becoming infected or staying HIV-negative amidst the crisis, attending memorial services, encountering discrimination at the hands of unsympathetic doctors, being rejected by biological family members, negotiating safe sex practices, and looking for ways to renew a community in crisis.

The performance works of this time employed a stylistic complexity oscillating between moments of rage and sadness, anger and renewal, humor and pathos. They are infused with the energy of community activism, and draw from the urgency of a community in medical and social crisis. They implicate a deeply homophobic society as a major cause for the ravages of the AIDS crisis, and encourage renewal and hope by imagining a time after AIDS.

Some AIDS-related performances, such as Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* played in mainstream venues and received wide mainstream recognition (*Destiny* played off Broadway in 1982 and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. *Angels* premiered on Broadway in 1993 winning both the Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize). Yet, gay male solo autobiographical works, like those of Tim Miller, David Drake, and Michael Kearns played mostly to and for other gay men.

Although the content of *Angels* and *Destiny* is politically subversive and deeply critical of mainstream homophobic culture, aesthetically and formally both are fairly conventional theatrical dramas. This may explain why the works have been so widely accessible to and resonant with mainstream audiences. The work of solo performers Miller, Drake, and Kearns is rooted in the more avant-garde, community-based tradition of queer solo performance described above.

As a solo gay male performer, the ways in which solo gay male performers have intervened in HIV/AIDS discourses are relevant to this project. Román argues that “gay male solo performers use their homosexual bodies in order to enter into the spectacle of AIDS so as to upstage it (*Acts*, 125).” Early in the AIDS crisis, gay male solo performers

“marked their bodies in such a way as to conjure AIDS and to unsettle the primacy of limited and demoralizing images of AIDS circulating in the national sphere at the time (*Acts*, 126).” Further, the gay male solo performer acted as a kind of mediating bridge allowing HIV-negative men to “negotiate reflexive identification” with HIV-positive men (*Acts*, 127). Most importantly though these performances created a space for gay men “to enact an intervention that began to call into question gay men’s own perception of AIDS (*Acts*, 126).”

My performance seeks to explore the experience of being HIV-negative. The HIV-negative gay male solo performer inhabits a complex position in relationship to HIV/AIDS discourses. The introduction of HIV-antibody testing in 1985 created an HIV-positive/negative binarism that has left HIV-negativity a largely unexamined category of identity and experience (*Acts*, 230). Román notes that “people with HIV and AIDS are often fetishized throughout culture as having access to certain truth claims unavailable to the uninfected (*Acts*, 231).” Additionally, performances about HIV-negativity usually have to work against the narrative conventions of AIDS-themed drama that position the revelation of HIV-positive status and death from AIDS as central plot points. This has left HIV-negative gay men with far fewer representations of experiences. In his performance *Naked Breath*, Tim Miller so elegantly describes the paradigmatic anxiety of being HIV-negative and making solo performance work about HIV/AIDS, “I worry they’ll think I’m a lightweight-know-nothing-who-said-you-could-talk-about-AIDS-from-your-position-of-negative-privilege queen (*Body Blows*, 161).”

The experience of HIV/AIDS has changed dramatically for gay men since 1996 (as I’ll describe below), and representations of HIV-negativity and HIV-indeterminance continue to be few. Los Angeles based performance artist Ragan Fox has been tackling these issues in his performances, and his motivations are similar to mine. He writes, “I had a difficult time finding narratives about men and women like me, people who were too afraid to test [for HIV]. I was a gay man in search of a narrative model (*Skinny*, 9).” Further he suggests that performances about HIV-negativity “intervene in discursive handlings of HIV that tend to ignore people who are affected by AIDS but who are not necessarily infected (*Negative*, 48).” I quote Fox here because his articles have been published very recently (in 2006 and 2007), and he, too, is interested in reviving conversations about HIV/AIDS with his performances.

Indeed, trying to comprehend those years of crisis depicted in the works of Miller and Kearns and others is very difficult for me. I’m not watching my friends and lovers die and I’m not positive myself. I’m not attending memorial services or ACT UP rallies or protesting pharmaceutical corporations. In fact, conversations about HIV/AIDS amongst gay men seem hard to come by these days. This would seem like a great thing, but then I hear reports that one-third of those infected with HIV don’t know they are infected, and then I read an article saying that syphilis is on the rise in New York City, and I feel like this lack of conversation is a serious problem. As a result, I volunteer in an HIV testing clinic one day a week, listen to people talk about their sexual experiences, take their fears seriously, and sooth their anxieties. And then I begin working on a performance that will tackle some of these issues.

HIV/AIDS Discourse since 1995

Since the material conditions of HIV/AIDS have changed quite considerably for gay men in the past ten years, what are the “new” concerns that I think my performance addresses?




This cocktail could lead to...

After a few drinks, you might not think clearly about protecting yourself from HIV. And, if you take risks, you could end up taking dozens of pills a day.

Think before you drink, or you might wake up with the hangover of a lifetime.

this cocktail.

Created by: Midwest AIDS Prevention Project • (888) A-CONDOM • Funded by: Rainbow Endowment
DESIGN: EGGPLANT PRODUCTIONS • PHOTO: RICH BULLDOG PROD.



HIV Meds- Ready To Go When You Are.

Introducing an easy, convenient, strip of packets that keep all of your daily meds sorted and labeled by date, time and correct dosage. So you can travel light and worry-free.

Take your medication when you should, no matter where you are. We're the only pharmacy in the area offering this revolutionary new solution delivered straight to your door! We're the closest, most convenient pharmacy you'll ever have. We're DirectRX. You are now free to move about the world.

DIRECTRX®
Timely, Accurate and Confidential Prescriptions
800.422.3227

Tear & Travel

www.directRX.com

Above are two advertisements that ran in the same issue (2/16/2006) of the metro-Detroit GLBT newspaper *Between the Lines*. They exemplify the complexity of and confusion around HIV/AIDS discourses that I mentioned in the introduction.

The first ad is an HIV/AIDS prevention message sponsored by the Midwest AIDS Prevention Project (MAPP). The logic of the ad goes something like this: binge drinking and partying can lead to unprotected sex, which leads to HIV infection, which then leads to trading a carefree HIV-negative existence for a difficult HIV-positive life of expensive drug treatments, dozens of pills each day, horrible side-effects, and chronic illness.

In comparison, the second ad, created by the mail-order pharmacy DirectRX, shows, in full color, how easy it is to be on HIV medications. Not only can you have the drugs delivered right to your door (thereby avoiding any embarrassment or breeches in confidentiality at your local pharmacy), but you can also have them sorted for you in cute, easy-to-carry pouches that fit neatly into the back pocket of your designer jeans. The ad suggests that life on HIV medication isn't so bad, and you can be just as carefree as you were before you became HIV-positive.

The ads picture two very different views about the realities of HIV. The first ad is dead serious, and uses a simplistic logic of risk. The ad doesn't describe specific risky behaviors or indicate a spectrum of risk; instead, it says that any unprotected contact, even one, will absolutely lead to HIV infection. Of course, this is not the case, and in fact, a complex set of factors must be considered when determining how at-risk any particular person may be. But, as is typical of many prevention messages, this ad invokes fear as the best prevention method.

The DirectRX ad isn't a risk prevention message at all. It's an advertisement for a drug company. Still, this advertisement is brought into conversation with the prevention message because both are in the same newspaper. In a nutshell, you get two completely contradictory messages: "living with HIV is terrible" versus "living with HIV is no big deal." Contradictions like these are widespread in media about HIV/AIDS. So how is the average, twenty-something gay man (such as myself) supposed to interpret such contradictory messages? Which message is true?

Since the introduction twelve years ago of antiretroviral medications to treat HIV (in 1995), two major perspectives have emerged. On one side of the discussion are the proponents of the AIDS-as-crisis model. This model grew out of the AIDS activism of the 1980s and the "abrupt and decisive changes" that gay men experienced during this time. It has been the primary foundation upon which HIV/AIDS prevention tactics, public policy, and activism have been built (Rofes 67-71). These prevention strategies invoke, over and over again, the language of crisis, and as a result, usually convey fear-related messages about sex. Leading the charge are many AIDS service organizations that are worried about losing their funding should the AIDS epidemic be configured in others ways than as a "crisis" (43-45).

On the other side of the discussion are the proponents of the "post-crisis" model that claims we are now in a "post-crisis" era of AIDS. Queer activist and scholar Eric Rofes writes, "by the early 1990s, signs began appearing that indicated that AIDS as a crisis was beginning to wane as an authentic representation of our communal experience of the epidemic (68)." This "post-crisis" perspective suggests that most gay men no longer experience AIDS as a crisis, but as one part of a multifaceted set of gay male

health issues (Rofes 88-94). Rofes suggests that the AIDS-as-crisis model may, in fact, be damaging to contemporary HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. This model does not imply that AIDS is over, by any means, but asserts that we are in a new phase of the epidemic that requires new strategies for prevention, policy, and activism. These new strategies would strive for a more nuanced understanding of gay male identity, desire, and practice in the post-crisis era, and be organized around the notion of negotiated safety, low-risk promiscuity, and harm reduction (222-223). The discursive battle between both sides has played out in both gay and mainstream media outlets over the past twelve years creating many mixed messages about the dangers of HIV.

To further complicate matters, the rise of gay neo-conservatism in the 1990s (perhaps represented most notably by the views of Andrew Sullivan and Larry Kramer) and the shifting agenda of GLBT political organizations have advanced same-sex marriage as the single most important concern for the GLBT community today. These mainstream GLBT politics privilege monogamous coupling and render other forms of sexual practice nearly invisible. Certainly, GLBT people are experiencing unprecedented visibility in mainstream media and politics. Yet, journalist Wayne Hoffman writes, “as gayness becomes more visible as a lifestyle or identity in popular culture, publicly visible *homosexuality*—that is, sexual behavior—seems to shrink in stature (Hoffman 340).”

Moreover, gay male public sexual culture has its own controversial place within this rhetoric. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, bathhouses have been gathering spaces for gay men, serving as sites for sexual contact as well providing the more conventional functions of community centers (Bérubé 34). Gay bathhouses reached their peak in the 1970s (after Stonewall and the birth of the modern gay rights movement), and were a central part of gay male urban life. When the AIDS crisis began, bathhouses in New York and San Francisco were forcibly and controversially closed by public health officials. Gay scholars still debate the efficacy of closing the bathhouses to prevent the spread of HIV in the 1980s, and some believe that closing the bathhouses actually slowed down HIV prevention efforts (Bérubé 49-50). Bathhouses were considered so central to gay male life at the time that many gay men protested the closures publicly (Bérubé 48). Still, as the AIDS crisis took hold, gay male sexual culture declined significantly, and many gay activists and scholars began to reject and critique public sexual culture as a major cause of the crisis (Rofes 131-142). The legacy of these critiques continues to the present.

Yet, since 1996, gay male public sex venues have experienced a rebirth. New bathhouses have opened and internet sites such as *gay.com* and *manhunt.net* offer a kind of virtual bathhouse experience for gay men in major urban centers and elsewhere. Although “too few gay men of any age have raised their voices in defense of preserving a public sexual culture in the age of AIDS (Hoffman 339),” many gay men are, nonetheless, participating in the revived culture. Still, the activism of neo-conservative gay male pundits combined with the conservative values of the mainstream GLBT movement shroud and shame public sexual culture, further impeding the development of a more nuanced understanding of gay male health and sexual practice in the post-crisis AIDS era (Pendleton 390). Seemingly, public sexual culture can exist, so long as no one talks about it.

Narrating my own experiences at the bathhouse is intended as an investigation of these complex issues. I approach the bathhouse as a contested site that contains

competing notions about safety and danger, sexual liberation and sexual shame, propriety and deviance, and health and illness. The bathhouse, for me, is a link to a more interesting, more sexually diverse moment in gay culture, but, “it is not possible today for most men to view public sex (or any sex, for that matter) except through the viral veil of safety and risk (Hoffman 351).”

sins with all my heart examines my multivalent feelings about public sexual culture. I am personally drawn to the bathhouse and sexual publics in general, but I’ve come of age in an era of relatively conservative GLBT politics in which both gay and straight people alike police the sexual lives of gay men. I’ve experienced mixed and competing messages about the dangers of HIV. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of my peers participate in public sexual culture via the internet, but many are resistant to discussing their participation for fear of being stigmatized or perceived as out-of-line with mainstream GLBT values.

I haven’t resolved these tensions in my own life, and, in an even more personal way, they are coupled with a Catholic upbringing that instilled in me a great sense of awe and fear of the power of institutions. My performance isn’t always sex positive, and it doesn’t always have all (or any of) the answers, but it comes from an earnest investment in expanding sexual diversity and creating a dialogue amongst gay men about these issues. As an artist, I seek to stage these kind of personal and political tensions as means for creating starting points for larger ongoing conversations.

I want to end this section with a long quote from Eric Rofes because I think it describes, with wonderful poignancy, my own personal experience and the context from which *sins with all my heart* originates:

[T]hese young men’s entire adult sex lives have been lived under the cloud of the epidemic. From the start, they have had to contend with profound linkages between gay sex and disease. The primary language about sex that has been placed in their mouths and wired into their brains has a vocabulary of “risk,” “condoms,” and “safer sex.” Instead of living through the period of gay liberation and sexual freedom, then having a house fall on them, they’ve constructed their sexual identities and networks amidst the reality of a rapacious, sexually transmitted virus (13).

Some Specific Performance Precedents

I want to discuss several performances that have a more specific relationship to *sins with all my heart*: Tim Miller’s *Naked Breath*, Larry Kramer’s *The Destiny of me*, David Drake’s *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, the film *Zero Patience* by John Greyson, and Spalding Gray’s *Gray’s Anatomy*. With the exception *Gray’s Anatomy*, all are works by gay men that focus on HIV/AIDS. I’ve included Gray because his performance explores illness-related anxiety which is part of my own narrative.

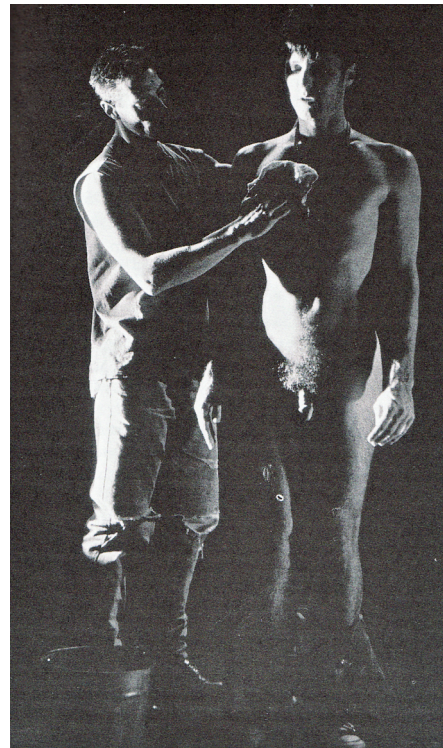
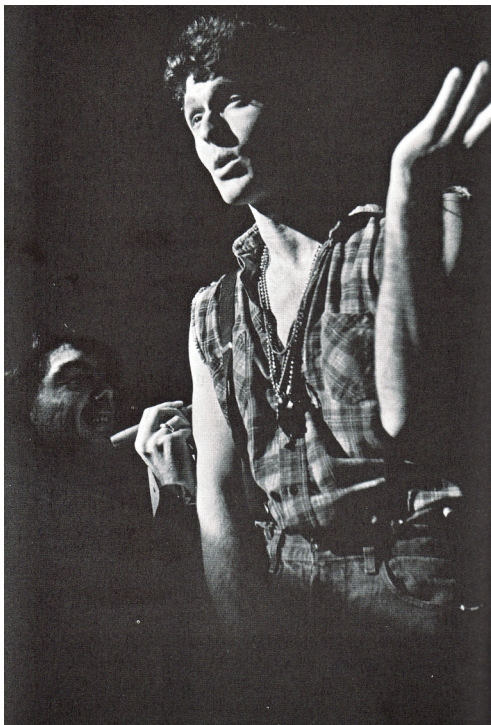
As I worked on *sins with all my heart*, I was reading quite of a lot of Tim Miller’s work. Miller is, in certain ways, the paragon of gay male solo performance—he is one of the most widely presented and published queer solo performers in the world. Miller’s work draws from his activism within the gay community and the personal experiences of being HIV-negative during the AIDS crisis.

One of Miller's signature practices is the use of body and nudity (or near nudity) in his performances. The ways in which he allows the audience to touch and interact with his body hearkens back to the aesthetics and practices of body art. His body is both his literal body onstage, and becomes, through his text and interactions with audience, the symbolic "body" of the community. In his performance, *Naked Breath* he asks an audience member to tattoo him with a marker and then does a ritualistic convening of the audience through breathing. He is masterful at bringing the audience along with him in the performance; the audience is always explicitly present in his narrative:

I'm breathing. Are you? How about you? Everybody take a breath. Let me hear. That was good [...] I'm gonna breathe you in. I'm gonna breathe in your warmth and the miracle of human presence in this room. You all got here! No one got hit by a car on their way to the theater! I don't take it for granted, believe me. (*Body Blows*, 126-127).

Later, after a pivotal scene, he strips and a member of the audience washes his body on stage. These relatively simple actions have a powerful impact within the performance. Although Miller uses his body much more effectively to engage the audience than I do, I think that the way I presented my own body in the second half of the show was inspired partly by Miller. In stripping down and literally drawing on my own body, I tried to capture some of the bodily vulnerability that Miller is so adept at summoning.

Miller is also the master of eroticizing almost everything; it's a wonderful quality in his work and one that I tried to use on a smaller scale in *sins*. I was encouraged by Miller's work to talk frankly about sex in *sins*. My intentions behind describing the bathhouse in detail were to bring the language of gay sex into the performance in a sexy way. I'm sure I could have used the language of erotics more effectively in some places which is something I want to consider in future revisions.



Tim Miller (*Naked Breath*, 1994)

Larry Kramer uses his own thinly veiled autobiography as a means for commenting on the AIDS crisis in *The Destiny of Me*. Kramer uses two separate actors to play the same character: the adult Ned (the stand-in for the adult Kramer) and the childhood Ned. This gives Kramer a dramatic device allowing his adult self to speak directly to his childhood self, and we as the audience see how the child becomes the man. *Destiny* follows a similar chronological pattern as *sins* by tracing childhood and adolescent episodes in relationship to adult gay identity. However, Kramer disrupts a straightforward chronology by positioning these episodes as remembrances of the adult Ned. The present crisis (Ned is close to dying from AIDS and is seeking an experimental, last-ditch treatment) very literally evokes the episodes from the past, and the viewer interprets those episodes with the knowledge of the present.

I wanted the episodes in *sins* to bear a similar relationship to each other. Thematically, the HIV testing experience I describe was what conjured all of the episodes in my show. I hoped the audience would tie these episodes together in relationship to the testing experience, especially in scene six when I overlap the language of confession and HIV counseling. However, I think that my intention for these scenes to read in relationship to that moment wasn't precisely clear. The chronological format that I use doesn't allow for the various conceptual elements to coalesce until very late in the performance. When I revise the show, I want use a strategy similar to Kramer's. I'd like the first scene to be the testing scene, and for the other scenes to grow out of that "contemporary moment."

In *sins*, I also attempted to make a distinction between my childhood self and my adult self through shifts in performative delivery. Both the child and adult versions of myself are usually present in the first three scenes of *sins*, but I didn't do the best job of distinguishing these voices at times. I think a revision that clarifies these voices, as well as a revision that places the past events in relationship to the present event would allow for some interesting interactions between my adult and childhood stories.

I was particularly drawn to John Greyson's 1993 film *Zero Patience*. Through its fantastical movie-musical style, *Zero Patience* manages to take a stab at such pivotal AIDS crisis issues as the business practices of large pharmaceutical companies, the psychopathological discourses around homosexuality and AIDS, the power of science and empiricism to dictate morality, the myth of the so-called "Patient Zero," and safer sex education—all this and a zippy 90's musical score.

In one scene, set in the bathhouse, a trio of men dance in their little white towels while singing: "When you pop a boner in the shower, don't blush, be proud, display!" In another notorious scene, two "talking assholes" deconstruct psychoanalytical models of homosexuality. They sing: "Sodomy ain't so symbolic; your rectum ain't a grave." "Freud said we have a death wish. Getting buggered's getting killed. Is this ghastly epidemic something our subconscious willed?" "An asshole's just an asshole. Skip the analytic crit."

After I saw *Zero Patience*, I began thinking about how to musicalize *sins with all my heart*. My inspiration for turning the club/bathhouse sequence into a musical montage was derived from this film. The musical numbers allow Greyson to engage serious content but deliver it in a comedic and enjoyable way. I employ a similar tactic in *sins*,

using musical theatre moments to undercut serious moments, which I'll talk about in more detail later.



The bathhouse sequence from *Zero Patience* (1993).



The bathhouse sequence from *sins with all my heart*.

In *Gray's Anatomy*, Spalding Gray discovers he has macula pucker, a degenerative eye condition, and describes his pursuit of treatment for the condition. Gray was raised as a Christian Scientist and has a lingering and intense fear of modern medicine. In Gray's work, I'm particularly interested in the way he handles his anxieties about his condition. He is particularly deliberate about commenting upon these anxieties so that they don't become narcissistic and alienating to the audience. For example Gray writes:

I was more freaked out than ever. I didn't want to go into a hospital. This puts me into a bubble fantasy. I didn't want medicine. I wanted magic, and that's all I was thinking about as I was sitting there. I mean, I wanted Jesus to walk into that waiting room the way he used to in the old days with the multitudes and *Bing!* the lame shall walk. I wanted E.T. If only E.T. would come in and take his little hot magic finger and touch me right on my pucker. That's what I'm about as I'm sitting there; I'm fantasizing about magic (*Anatomy*, 54).

As played by Gray, anxiety becomes comedy—just as he takes his neuroses seriously, he undercuts them by pointing them out as ridiculous.

Tim Miller enacts a similar tactic in *Naked Breath* when he speaks about his anxieties related to sex:

I have a special wing of fear, about the size of the Louvre, dedicated to the things that I might “get” from the men I get close to. Do sex with. CLAP! WARTS! HEPATITIS! CRABS! AMOEBAS! HIV! This fear chews me up for breakfast. This fear is a tidal wave that is hovering above me, whirling threatening. My mouth frozen in a scream. This fear is a virus too. It’s a fierce enemy, takes no prisoners. After some sex that, okay, wasn’t so safe, it keeps me sleepless and tortured at 3 A.M. [...] Lately, I’ve tried to turn this fear around. To flip that word “get” upside down. Like a fried egg. Over. Easy. To see things another way. I want to honor the things that I actually “get” from other men. LOVE. TOUCH. INSPIRATION. SEX. KISSES AND WISDOM (*Body Blows* 162).

David Román writes of this passage, “Miller’s performance persona conveys an anxiety around sex and HIV that borders on the debilitating and, because of its excessiveness, on the comic (*Acts* 262).” I tried to be aware of and use this tactic in *sins*. I think that anyone who does autobiographical work has various fears about their narratives reading as solipsism, and staging these kinds of anxieties as comedy is one way to reduce the potential for that kind of reading. In *sins* however I didn’t write a lot of this comedy into the text, but I think that the ways in which I perform the last three scenes and layer them with music create moments of comedy that comment on my anxiety. For example, I could have played the HIV testing scene as a very straightforward retelling, but I bring in “I Could of Danced All Night” to highlight the absurdity of the situation. Later, in Scene 7, I use the children’s song “Tick Tock Clock.” I start reacting to the song because it keeps interrupting my state of nervousness, and generally prevents me from becoming totally engrossed in the anxiety of the moment. These are both tenuous moments to perform effectively because they rely almost entirely on whether or not I can successfully “play” the comedy. They are not as effectively embedded in the text, and so they rely on my giving just the right performance. In rehearsal and in performance, sometimes I was able to do that and sometimes I wasn’t, which I think led to an uneven reception of these moments. The moment when anxiety transforms into comedy isn’t always clear in *sins*.

Drake’s *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* is similarly invested in the ethos of community activism that Miller describes in his work, but Drake’s work is far less invested in comedy as a tactic. The tone of Drake’s work is more invested in rage and pathos, as he describes being gay bashed and attending AIDS memorial services. Drake’s moment of catharsis comes at the end of his monologue when he envisions a utopic future replete with a cure for AIDS and a “Queer Cultures Wing” at the Smithsonian. Drake is adept at using fragments set to musical beats to create a kind of language collage, and this is something that I employ in *sins*. Here’s a passage from Drake’s performance:

Leather jacket,
Tee-shirt pressed,
501’s and boots,
we’re set...

for walkin’.
Boots
were made

for walkin'.

Walkin', walkin', walkin', walkin'
on the streets at 1 A.M.
to the cell
where they keep the men (*Night 44*)

Single, single, single, single
single boys all around
In every crook.
In every crack.
In every
single
square
inch.
Hit the floor.
There's room for more (*Night 45*)

Stylistically, this approach captures the fragmented feeling created by a night at the club—maybe you're drinking or drugging, maybe it's a blur of light and dark and loud music, maybe you only remember the club in flashes. These fragments appropriate the feeling of the club as performance style. Something I do in my own work:

Jake. On my right arm. Girlfriends always travel in packs.
Spin. College night. Belmont, Halsted.
You spin me right round baby.
Looking good, buzzed head, tank top
Tanned brown skin makes me look thinner. Slimmer.
Summer, gorgeous summer.

Two more, two dollar vodka-lemonades
I want to get laid.
This crowd is too young for my taste,
Cruel, cruel, cruel summer.

Two more, two dollar vodka-lemonades,

Too good to be true.
Too true to be good (*sins*, Scene 5)

Describing the comedic elements of works like *Zero Patience* and *Naked Breath* and the more serious elements of works like *The Destiny of Me* and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* reveals a broader aesthetic tension in *sins*. Ultimately the narrative tone of my show was most similar to Kramer's and Drake's tone. Both are invested in the pathos of HIV/AIDS as actual pathos. Yet, I felt drawn to both comedic and dramatic narrative

tones, and I'm not sure if I ever fully committed to the show being either serious or comedic. This creates a slightly muddled narrative tone at times, and, depending on my live performance, it creates narrative failures and successes. If I move forward with future productions of this work, I'll have to address these conflicts in narrative tone in the revision process. The uneven reception of some of these moments suggests that I need to refine my stylistic approach to this performance (whether this is comedy or drama) and clarify my overall message.

Creative Work

(See annotated script, Appendix A.)

[Click for preview video of *sins with all my heart*.](#)

[Click for full-length performance video of *sins with all my heart*.](#)

Visual Concerns

In general, the performance precedents that I've established for *sins* are visually minimal. Due to a combination of both conceptual and practical concerns, *sins* is also visually minimal. Ostensibly, the majority of my creative energies were focused on creating the text for this performance and rehearsing the performative aspects (staging, choreography, delivery). In my performance practice over the past three years, my work has predominantly evolved from a text. Since I was returning to the solo format for this performance, I felt that the text and my physical performance would be best served by a series of simple, but compelling visual gestures. From a practical standpoint, I had certain anxieties about mounting an overly detailed physical production in the incredibly short amount of time that I had to work in the performance space (five days including the performances), and without a full-scale design team. I wanted the visual production to emphasize the importance of my physical presence, keep the work intimate, and draw out concepts in the text related to private and public space. These were manifested in the creation of pathways of light on the stage, the costuming choices (including the sequined uniform), and the animated eyes. As I've mentioned I wanted to evoke an aesthetic tone that could portray visual vulnerability and uncanniness, and, to a lesser degree, camp.

Video

I was interested in moments of surveillance that capture vulnerability and feelings of uncanniness, like Doug Aitken's installation *The Moment* (2005). In this installation, Aitken enacts surveillance on people in their most vulnerable moments of sleep in their bedrooms. I was also reminded of the visual layering of Theatre Complicite's production of the *Elephant Vanishes* (2003) where a wide variety of live-feed and pre-recorded video create an entire world of surveillance. Aitken's surveillance is less intrusive than that of *The Elephant Vanishes* but both capture moments of vulnerability. *The Elephant Vanishes* captures the uncanny feeling of déjà vu by creating copies of the same individual over and over again. Tracey Emin enacts a kind of self-surveillance similar to my own intentions by placing her bed in the gallery (*My Bed* [1998]).



Doug Aitken, *The Moment* (2005)



Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998)



The Elephant Vanishes (Production Stills, 2003)

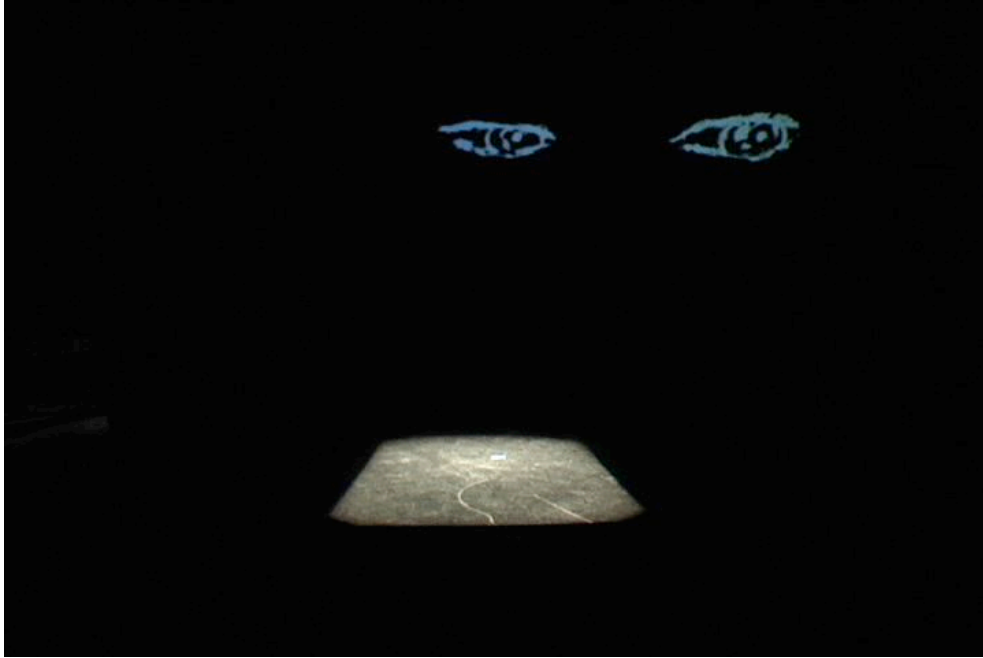
In my preliminary video studies for the performance, I attempted to stage a kind of visual omniscient surveillance through the use of steep camera angles that would suggest a forced perspective of one object looking down upon another. I wanted to diminish my own stature and make myself appear vulnerable in relationship to the stature of Catholic iconography. In video sketches one and two, you can see this experiment. In another experiment, I overlaid several camera angles that were fixed on the same action of putting on a sweater. In video sketches three and four, I used an overhead shot, a three hundred sixty degree tracking shot, and several detail shots of my hands. In editing, I laid them one on top of the other and manipulated the opacity such that you could see all angles at once. In this experiment, I wanted to invoke the omniscient “eye of God” and imagine what it would be like to see everything, all at once, from every angle.



Video Sketches 1-4

I had trouble determining how to integrate these video performance techniques into the live performance, and without an organizing context based in the script, these experiments received a generally lukewarm reception in the critique process. A recurring set of questions emerged during these critique sessions: what is the role of video in this performance? Why are you using video in the performance? Does the performance need video to accomplish the visual goals? And at the time, I couldn't answer these questions sufficiently for myself or my committee.

I made a final attempt at engaging these ideas of surveillance by incorporating hand-drawn animated eyes. Through the animated eyes, I wanted to suggest that, although the audience would be doing most of the watching that evening, they were also being watched. The eyes implicated everyone in a system of "watching," and foreshadowed the notion of "being watched" as an important narrative theme.

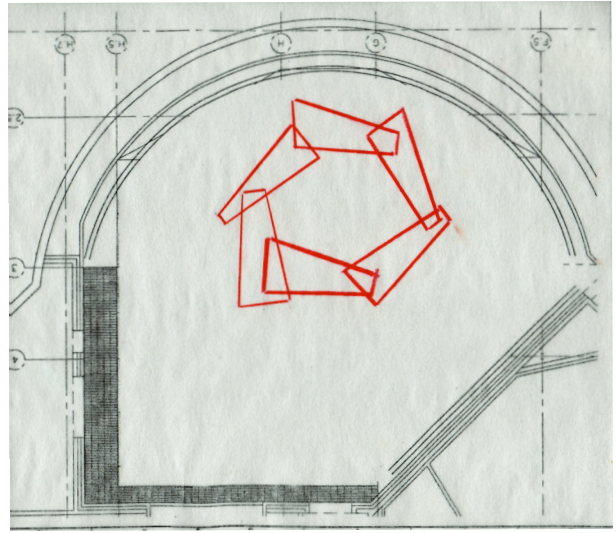
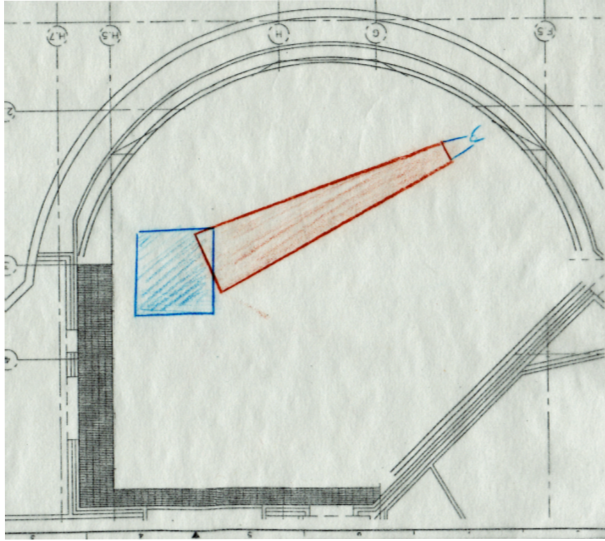


Animated Eyes

I think that these eyes were a somewhat diluted representation of these broader aesthetics. In this day and age of ubiquitous digital cameras and the internet, suggesting surveillance with a pair of hand drawn eyes probably isn't the best approach. As I imagine visual revisions for this work, I am drawn to the idea of doing something similar to the video work found in Theatre Complicite's *The Elephant Vanishes*. I can imagine several live-feed cameras positioned behind and around various screened-off areas in the theatre. I could use these screened areas to represent the confessional, the closet, and the bathhouse. Even if I were positioned behind a screen, you would still be able to watch me via video. This would create an actual surveillance system in the theatre and add an interesting sense of voyeurism to both the confession and bathhouse sequences. This approach might also allow me to stage moments where I could step out of the action and literally watch myself being surveilled (through looped or pre-recorded footage).

Pathways of light

I developed the pathways of light from a series of sketches. I used floor plans of the Video Studio and sketched some basic patterns. These floor plan sketches are common in theatrical design (ranging from the simplistic to the highly detailed). The basic light formations became organizing patterns for stage blocking and choreography, and were the foundation of the lighting design.



Original lighting sketches with corresponding photos in the theatre.

After I delivered these sketches to Jacques Mesereau at the Video Studio, we worked together to “sketch” these patterns in the actual space. As we worked through these various sketches, I made the decision that I wanted the lights to have a very hard edge so that you could see the boundary of the spaces that they created. I felt that these patterns kept the work focused and more intimate by creating small areas of light in which I could perform. I also liked the starkness of these patterns. They had the effect of illuminating only small areas and left the rest of the space shrouded in darkness and mystery. This seemed like a visual metaphor for autobiographical memory and the ways in which certain memories are pulled out and others recede into the darkness.

By creating three very focused areas of light on the stage, I created three distinct spaces in Scene One, and introduced the performance's major visual metaphors. First, there is the space of the closet inhabited by the clothing rack. Second, a triangular pathway of light creates a line connecting the closet directly to the third distinct space, a square of white light representing the Catholic confessional. By deliberately connecting the closet to the Confessional with a pathway of light, I created a visual reference to the ways in which both spaces have a private/public connotation: they suggest privacy, yet both are formed by larger cultural imperatives. As Michael Warner writes, "[the closet] is experienced by lesbians and gay men as a private, individual problem of shame and deception. But it is produced by the heteronormative assumptions of everyday talk. It feels private. But in an important sense it is publicly constructed."

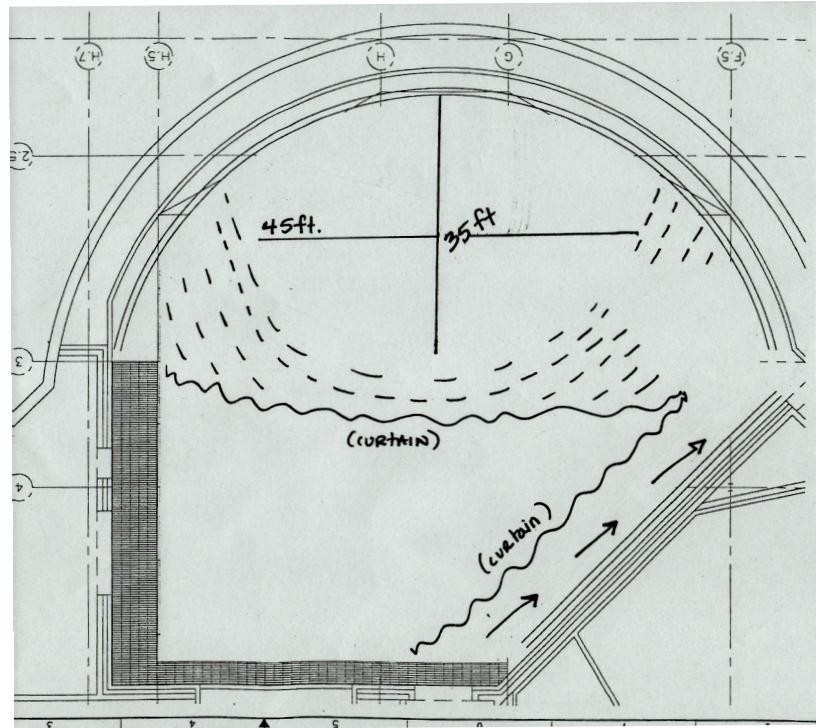
The connection underlines the transformational potential of both spaces. The literal closet promises transformation through bodily adornment and the literal confessional promises spiritual transformation. Later, when the square of light becomes the private bathhouse room and then the counseling office, it represents a different kind of transformation, the possibility of seroconversion, transforming from HIV-negative to HIV-positive.

Once I enter the square of light on stage, I've entered the private little room, and once I enter the private little room, I keep coming back to it during the performance, over and over again trying to understand its complexity. And by the end, that private little room is simultaneously the confessional, the closet, the cubicle at the bathhouse, and the counseling room.

The pathway of light also suggests that any individual agency we might possess is usually carved out for us based on the kinds of privilege we have (usually as result of gender, sexual orientation, race, and class). In certain ways, choices are pre-formulated within the limitations of these social categories. The pathway at times represents social expectations, and as a character in the piece, I sometimes move in the pathway, against the pathway, and outside of the pathway to comment upon my own resistance to or acceptance of those expectations.

The pathway re-emerges several times in the narrative, usually during moments when there is a crucial choice to be made. The pathway is a visual representation of the liminal space of decision-making and agency. When I arrive at the bathhouse, a new circular pattern appears on the floor. But this time, instead of the lights illuminating themselves, my character's movement illuminates each part of the circle. This suggests a new kind of agency that I claim through my participation in public sexual culture. However, once again I layer the original pathway and square of light onto this new circular pattern to add a complexity to the situation. Old and new ways of thinking and being collide and create a puzzling collage of meanings in the contemporary moment.

One criticism of this lighting plan is its legibility to the audience. Initially, when I planned the layout of the theatre I wanted to have a much smaller performance and seating area that would have brought the audience much closer to the patterns on the floor. Unfortunately, due to time constraints in the Video Studio, I was not able to realize this plan. What happened, of course, is that these lighting patterns were only clearly legible to the first row of the audience, and vague or illegible for the rest of the audience. As several people have suggested, using risers to seat the audience may have been preferable in this situation.



Original seating plan for the Video Studio.

On Costuming (Uniforms/Uniformity)

From the beginning, I wanted that the Catholic school uniform of my childhood to play a role in this performance. I wanted to tease out the Catholic school uniform's iconic association with "order, conformity and discipline (Craik 3)." The use of the uniform further contributes to my ruminations on personal choice and agency within the performance narrative. On the surface, the Catholic school uniform represents an utter lack of choice. Indeed, I wasn't able to actually choose the clothes I wore each day until I reached college.

In the months leading up to the performance, I began buying navy blue dress pants from thrift stores. I went a little overboard, purchasing about fifteen pairs, along with a few navy blue sweaters, navy blue ties, and white short-sleeved dress shirts. When the director Erin Markey arrived, we spent an afternoon going through the items I had purchased. All of the pants were somewhat "ugly and ill-fitting (Craik 53)" and Erin and I couldn't decide which was the ugliest (funniest?) pair. So, in order to include a range of funny pants, we decided that I should change my costume in every scene, and that each costume would be a variation on the theme of the Catholic school uniform.

The succession of uniforms proved to be an important visual element in the performance. In the three scenes that are set during my childhood, I change three times and never find a pair of pants that is a good fit. This visual pun of "not fitting" plays with

Jennifer Craik's idea that "school rules and curricula rest on uniforms and their rules to constitute a comprehensive training for adult masculinity and the roles boys will be expected to play as men (62)." The ill-fitting uniform underscores my own personal anxiety around gender and sexuality. And, although I try to make the uniform fit in the first three scenes, I won't find a good fit until the second half of the story.

Craik also suggests that the uniform plays "the role of *agent provocateur* for boys who frequently reject normative codes of adult masculinity in favor of alternate constructions (63)," and while "we think of the public face of uniforms as coterminous with order, control, confidence and conformity, we also know about the *other face* of uniforms as subversion, transgression (4)." This quote describes the second half of the show (scenes four through seven) in which I begin to "queer" the Catholic school uniform. In scene four, I make a subtle alteration by changing into a pair of American Apparel brand navy blue briefs. By changing from plain white generic briefs to a pair of designer brand underwear (a brand that is recognizable and popular amongst twenty-somethings), I make a subtle shift towards claiming my sexuality and making myself attractive to other gay men. Yet, the navy blue color still echoes my Catholic past and my ties to that institution.

In scene five, I create a gay boy clubbing "uniform" using elements reminiscent of the Catholic school uniform: well-fitted navy blue designer jeans, a stylish fitted white shirt (unbuttoned seductively at the chest), and a self-consciously askew navy blue tie. Here, through the discovery of my queer identity, I discover a way to reinterpret the Catholic school uniform as sexy and provocative. When I finally assemble this new look, I do a joyful dance around the stage, finding satisfaction in this new identity and new clothing.

However, Craik reminds us that "cultural transgression is a means of simultaneously undermining and reinforcing the rules of uniforms since an effective transgressive performance relies on shared understandings of normative meanings (210)." When I arrive at the bathhouse, I remove my new outfit to reveal that painted on my body is a white dress shirt and navy blue tie. The painted-on uniform suggests that even though I might have escaped the ill-fitting uniform of my childhood, I still carry a substantial imprint of the Catholic school uniform (and all its connotations) on my body and in my psyche. Here the uniform is rendered in a cartoonish manner resembling a child's drawing. The childish rendering hearkens back to the formation of identity in childhood, and demonstrates how the technologies that produce normativity leave powerful marks on our bodies and minds that complicate acts of resistance and agency.

The constant changing from one school uniform to the next, and the gradual adapting and queering of that uniform does two things in the live performance. First, the uniform serves as a constant reminder of how social institutions exert control over bodies. The uniform represents a heteronormativity that, no matter how poorly it may fit any one individual, is still a compulsory "outfit" that one is expected to wear.

Second, and most importantly, the act of constantly dressing and undressing into the "same" outfit adds a continuous element of visual interest and humor that always plays in juxtaposition to the darker, more serious elements of the text. The visual spectacle of ill-fitting clothing, I think, is simply funny. The clothing in scenes one through three accentuates my awkward clumsiness. In scene five, my club outfit is more hyperbolic than literal: it's a little too tight and it wants to be sexier than it actually is. Stripping to reveal that my skin is a Catholic school uniform provides another comedic moment. The audience becomes engaged in the visual playfulness of these costume

changes. Each time I return to the clothing rack, they anticipate another variation, and they are primed to look for whatever wacky thing I'll pull out of my closet next.

Overall, I liked the way that using uniforms commented on uniformity and socialization. One criticism has been that the cavernous performance space diminished the effectiveness of these changes. I think in future productions, I'd like to use a screened off area as a closet which could focus the action of changing. Going back to the idea of live-feed cameras, I can imagine these changes being amplified by projecting them much larger than life size while they are occurring. Another suggestion has been that the changes were too similar. I think that experimenting with altering the fit of the uniforms in more obvious ways could address this issue.

Conceptual Concerns

On Camp and Disidentification

My interpersonal "everyday" style hearkens back to Esther Newton's description of "the camp." A camp (as I imagine and often style myself to be) is "a homosexual wit and clown; his campy productions and performances are a continuous creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and, in the process, defining a positive homosexual identity (110)." As I was writing this performance, I attempted to connect with my everyday camp voice but, as I mentioned before, I used this project as an opportunity to cultivate a different voice, a voice that I can only describe as straightforward earnestness.

The humor I wrote into the narrative has all the potential qualities of camp, "incongruity, theatricality, and humor (106)" (perhaps in the spirit of camp, but not camp exactly). Some examples are comparing the confessional to the private room at the bathhouse, contrasting my fifth grade self with my adult self, confusing the sexiness of the gay bar with the performative sexiness of musical theatre. These techniques were all geared towards a camp aesthetic of "laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying" and a "humor that does not cover up, it transforms (Newton 109)."

However, I'm aware that the narrative didn't always reach the heights of campiness, and I think perhaps this is related to Newton's notion that camp is a "philosophy of transformations (105)." While all the elements of camp—incongruity, theatricality, and humor—were present in this narrative, that moment of transformation didn't always occur. I flirted with the failure of camp, the idea that "when the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity (109)."

Sometimes, in these moments when the potential for the maudlin emerged, Erin and I would explore visual or performative strategies that revisited camp through performance as opposed to text. These explorations proved particularly important in scenes six and seven. Erin helped me to realize that although I'm staging my authentic anxiety, I am also over-dramatizing that anxiety to create comedy.

I'm also intrigued by Andrew Ross' suggestion that "camp involves a rediscovery of history's waste (151)." Ross points to the notion that camp resuscitates and transforms things that no longer have cultural life; camp reimagines the possibilities for the discarded objects of commercial capitalism (152). At the same time that I was reading Ross, I discovered artist Mike Kelley's writings on the uncanny; I saw a strange relationship between the uncanny and camp. Kelley argues that those same discarded objects create

an uncanny experience of “confusion as to whether something is dead or alive (Kelley183)” and serve as a reminder of human mortality. Both the uncanny and camp use cultural refuse as raw material, but provoke different sensations. Camp produces sensations of humor, renewal, and optimism, while the uncanny provokes feelings of loss and mortality.

I reflected on this notion as I was writing Scene Three. The Cathedral of Notre becomes more than a simple tourist destination for me; it encourages an intense feeling of insignificance and a crisis of faith; the cathedral is an uncanny object in this way. Yet, I felt an urge to reclaim this moment of crisis by invoking the regenerative potential of camp. In the original version of “Is That All There Is?” a narrator presents a series of tragedies (her house burns down, she is spurned by a lover) and she replies to each tragedy with the pithy “is that all there is?” I’ve been captivated by this song for as long as I can remember. To me, the song demonstrates the heart and soul of camp humor: poking fun at life’s tragedies is the way to survive, and our best bet is to “break out the booze and have a ball!” Through the use of “Is That All There Is?” I attempt to reclaim this crisis of faith as a rebirth. The strange juxtaposition of the overwhelming Cathedral of Notre Dame and the wryly camp “Is That All There Is?” creates an uneasy moment between the comforts and constraints of the present and the risks and potential of the future. In the moment I describe here, the confines of Catholic spirituality create anticipation and excitement for coming out, but also anxiety and fear about what I could or would lose as a result of coming out. In this scene, I’m testing the waters between the religion I know (Catholicism) and the “religion” I’m only beginning to learn (gay identity). The oscillation between song and monologue, between earnest youthful spirituality and campy (dis)enchantment, points to my concurrent feelings of optimism and terror in that moment of my life.

If, in fact, I fail at camp in this work, which arguably I do in certain moments, then how might I describe and interpret my narrative strategy? José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification could be a useful rubric. Muñoz writes: “To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject (12).” Further, the disidentifying subject “tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form (Muñoz 12).” Camp is certainly one mode of disidentification, but disidentification as a practice doesn’t necessarily engage humor as the primary focus or end result. To disidentify means to perform intersectionality in a way that stages a critique. In *sins*, I may be staging various disidentifications with the ways in which HIV/AIDS is addressed in contemporary gay activism, with the assimilationist tendencies of same-sex marriage, and with the repressive practices of Catholicism.

The Panopticon and Surveillance

Although I reference my own experiences as a Catholic, the performance is not about Catholicism per se, but about the ways in which confession stands in for a variety of social institutions that have the power to shape and control our identities, and discipline deviance. A major focus of *sins with all my heart* is how social norms, institutions, and social surveillance shape our identities and the choices we make. In his classic work, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes, “our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance” into which “the individual is carefully fabricated (217).” Foucault theorizes

that knowledge and power in modern society are created through a complex and stealthy system of surveillance and social control. Surveillance makes all human phenomena visible in such a way that social norms and deviance can be categorized and managed.

His theory is based on the idea of the “panopticon,” a modern prison designed to allow one guard to watch many prisoners at once while remaining unseen by the prisoners. This system decentralizes power in such a way to enable the “automatic functioning of power” and to ensure that the source of power is unverifiable (201-202). Foucault believes that “panopticism” has spread throughout modern society, and that surveillance and disciplinary power emanate from both individuals and institutions. Power exposes and controls “human multiplicities,” but power itself remains largely invisible (218). As a result, individuals have difficulty determining and critiquing the source of power. While individuals experience the deleterious effects of constant surveillance, they are also complicit in perpetuating the system through self-surveillance and by surveilling others.

One of the many sites for making human behaviors visible is the Christian Confessional and the many secular practices that are descendents of the Confessional, such as “interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, letters (Foucault, *History* 63).” In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the practice of confession provided the foundation for modern sexual discourse. Foucault writes, “From the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession (Foucault, *History* 61).” Confession required “the task of passing everything to do with sex through the endless mill of speech (*History* 21)” culminating in the great Western science of sexuality (*scientia sexualis*) (*History* 53). He suggests that “Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth (*History* 58)” and that “Western man has become a confessing animal (*History* 59).” According to Foucault, confession became a technology used to sort bodies and behaviors in powerful ways, particularly around sexual practice. As a religious ritual, confession sorts out bodies that are sinful, excessive, and transgressive. As a secular practice, confession medicalizes bodies as deviant, abnormal, and diseased (*History* 67).

sins with all my heart approaches the confessional and surveillance from a Foucauldian perspective. In some ways, I was less interested in the actual details of my Catholic childhood and more interested in what the confessional could represent in a full-length performance about gay identity and HIV/AIDS. By invoking the confessional, I sought to invoke the powerful social technologies that pathologize gay sexuality both as social deviance and medical abnormality. The narrative trajectory connects religious confession (with all its moral trappings) to the HIV test—an experience that can be just as moralizing as it is medicalizing. Despite its medical purposes, some gay men experience HIV testing as a kind of moral judgment of their gay identity, as opposed to what it should be—a health-based intervention that encourages sexual risk reduction. When testing clients, counselors have to be very careful not to conflate sexual identity with risk behaviors. The HIV testing and counseling process can easily enact a kind of panopticism that can engender a complex emotional experience of paranoia, panic, and vulnerability, as *sins with all my heart* dramatizes. By invoking panopticism, I also wanted to suggest that despite current trends in GLBT visibility, the powerful forces that pathologize homosexuality are still lurking in the background.

Public and Private, Agency and Social Control

My earliest experience in the confessional, at the age of six, gave me the overwhelming feeling that I was being watched, not only constantly by God, but also by the so-called earthly representatives of God: individual priests who themselves stood in for the institution of the Catholic Church. Although, at the age of six I didn't have a sophisticated understanding of surveillance, I remember feeling embarrassed by the process. I was confessing "sins" that didn't happen when I was at school or church. They happened mostly at home, and, to me, they felt private. When I reflect on my first Confession, I recognize it as an important moment when my childish, straightforward notion of private and public was first complicated. Confession ruptured the simple separation between home (private) and everything else (public).

The narrative reflects back on Foucault's notion of panopticism, and evokes interesting questions about what is private and what is public. If, for example, everyone is constantly watching everyone else, and technologies like confession ensure surveillance, does privacy actually exist? And further, does anything really occur outside of the constructs of social life? In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner argues that public and private are confusing, socially constructed notions that can represent both physical spaces and sets of social relations (29).

My narrative stages a tension between individual private desire and socially constructed public power relations. I engage the idea of agency and choice early in the show. In the monologue, I suggest that going to confession "seems like a choice," yet, when I reflect back, I realize that Confession was one of a series of Catholic sacraments that I would compulsorily experience during my childhood. My memory reflects a kind of false consciousness, a lack of understanding for the cultural systems that construct agency and choice for individuals. In saying the "Act of Contrition" I emphasize the particular line—"...in *choosing* to do wrong, in failing to do good, I have sinned.."—as a means of foreshadowing my own choice to come out as gay. In relationship to the dogma of Catholicism, almost everything I do, say, and think in my adult life is "doing wrong." I would have to make a choice "to do wrong" in order to resist Catholicism, as well as broader socio-cultural norms that still, to a degree, pathologize homosexuality.

I'm not at all suggesting that resistance to socialization and social control is futile, but I insinuate that despite our best abilities, socialization continues to have a major influence in our lives even after we have made conscious decisions to critique it.

The Condom Moment

The condom moment is controversial. In the six months before rehearsals began, I must have written and re-written this moment at least six times before settling on the version that I performed. The condom moment is controversial because striking a balance between my perceived risk and my actual risk was difficult. As the insertive partner in this sexual contact, I was at significantly less risk for HIV infection than my receptive partner. In an earlier version of the script, I spent some time talking about how my partner and I made assumptions about each other in this encounter:

Why didn't I stop when he took the off condom? And why did he take the condom off of me? What kind of assumptions was he making about me? What kind of assumptions did I *let* him make about me? Maybe he assumed that I was negative, and since I didn't protest at first, since I went ahead, maybe I confirmed his assumption. I didn't think about *our* risk in the moment, *his* risk, I thought about *my* risk. I had come to the bathhouse seeking a ritual, a way to connect with other gay men, a deeper understanding of my sexuality, my humanity, and this mistake...the smart "Leija boy" made this mistake. And there was no easy absolution. HIV ruined that simple relationship between confession and forgiveness, desire and action. HIV made something as natural as sex something to be afraid of. And I just wanted to be forgiven. If you fuck up, you just should be able to get forgiveness (Leija, draft dated 1/30/07).

When I began rehearsing this text, it didn't quite work. In certain ways, my delivery felt heavy-handed and didactic. After several different attempts to make the text work, I decided to try something different:

A condom is cute and round and comes in different colors. My favorite is red, because you can always see that it's there, that it hasn't slipped or tripped it's way off your dick. Not flesh toned condoms, my least favorite, like I'm not going to notice, like it isn't there, it wasn't there, only for a few seconds. I'm the top—is the condom my responsibility? A condom is sexy because it has to be sex, because we don't have a choice. It's an accessory to sex, like a handbag or a great pair of black leather shoes. Or an accessory, like an accomplice, you need it to commit the crime. A condom is on the floor instead of on my dick where it should be (Leija, draft dated 3/1/07).

This new text (which was integrated into the final performance) put the focus on the issue of the condom, and did so in a way that created an interesting shift in tone. I like this text because it subtly addresses my failure to be concerned about my partner when the condom came off. I also like the text because it doesn't undermine my generally positive feelings about the bathhouse, but places the focus on unprotected sex—an event that can occur anywhere.

This moment was very difficult for me to narrate. I didn't remove the condom (in fact, I insisted on it being there in the first place), and when he removed the condom from me, I assumed (wrongly or rightly) that it was acceptable for me to proceed unprotected. This may in turn have encouraged an assumption on his part that I was HIV-negative. But, I'll never know. After he left that room, and I left the bathhouse, I never saw my partner again; I had no idea who he was or how to contact him. And three months later, when I walked into the testing clinic, I was alone—alone considering the ramifications of these actions on my own health.

In these particular scenes, I think I am swayed by my experience as an HIV testing counselor and the public health adage that a counselor can only evaluate and manage the behaviors of the client (and not the behaviors of the client's partners). Moreover, public health messaging revolves around the adage "protect yourself," a decidedly individualistic message, even though it is ultimately intended for the benefit of community health. Of course, "protect yourself" doesn't equate to only caring about

oneself, but, I am suggesting that within the contemporary context of “stalled rhetoric and political confusion (Román, *Performance* 76)” around HIV/AIDS, this prevention message sounds a lot more like “every man for himself.”

I think that this individualistic messaging can intensify the perception that one is alone and isolated in these matters, and I think, that in my case, it also intensified my perception of risk. The actual risk was slight, but my perception of it was overwhelming. And I think that this performance, to some extent, is about perceptions of risk, and how individuals and communities manage those perceptions. This is a question embedded in the work, that is mirrored in the contemporary discourse around HIV/AIDS: how at risk are we *really*?

Musical Theatre Moments

Bill Savran wrote in his brilliant defense of musical theatre:

No theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away. This utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced (216).

In this performance, I rely on the “seductive” qualities of the musical theatre genre in two ways. First, I use musical theatre moments as comedy to counterbalance some of the wide-eyed earnestness of my text. Using song and choreography to undercut earnestness was one of my more successful comedic strategies. Second, I think musical theatre often reads as a harmless theatrical trope, and that audiences are generally comfortable with its conventions. For this reason, using these moments can be a strategy for exploring controversial or discomfiting material without completely alienating the audience. From a formal perspective, singing and stylized movement add complexity to the mechanics of the performance. They provide moments of visual and acoustic variety, and work to transform the text of the script into stage-worthy action. Music becomes a performance partner, and I react to it as I would react to another actor in the space.

Usually, I like to appropriate excerpts from songs. This allows me to intertwine song and monologue, and use the songs to comment upon the dramatic action. By re-contextualizing the songs in my narrative, I can reinterpret their meanings for my own thematic purposes.

A good example of this is in scene six, when I appropriate Eliza Doolittle’s song “I Could Have Danced All Night” from *My Fair Lady*. When Eliza sang the song, she was referring to a wonderful high society ball. When I sing the song, I’m getting an HIV test and referring back to an evening of dancing at a gay bar and going to the bathhouse. In a certain way, I cast myself as the not-so-naïve ingénue in my own story, and I use the song to refer back to an experience that was pleasurable but complicated. Had the condom incident not occurred, that evening would have been like any other—I would have gone dancing and to the bathhouse, and simply had a wonderful time.

In scene two, I use Bette Midler’s popular song “From A Distance” to invoke a specific cultural moment from the early 1990s. “From A Distance” was generally interpreted as a comforting and inspirational pop anthem that affirmed the presence of

God in the world. I turn the song against itself to formulate this question: if God is watching us, why isn't he doing anything? This, of course, plays into my overarching themes of surveillance and voyeurism.

From scene five to the finale, nearly every moment in the show is underscored, and music becomes the pulse of the show. The quality of my movement changes too, becoming highly choreographed and stylized. This aesthetic change marks the transition from closeted childhood and to out adulthood.

Scene five is a musical theatre montage—a fast-paced journey of song, speak-singing, and dance that carries the viewer into the sexual subcultures of gay men. I wanted the viewer to be swept up in the excitement of the music and dance so that they wouldn't feel too much discomfort on the journey. The 1950s-era instrumental songs “Gay Spirits” and “Parade of the Clowns” underscore my optimistic and exciting arrival in Chicago. Then I use a technique I first discovered in the works of Luis Alfaro and David Drake (see *Downtown* and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*). Both Alfaro and Drake create their own spoke-sung lyrics and set them to techno beats. In *sins*, I use the techno song “Satisfaction” and spoke-sung lyrics to describe the bar and then the bathhouse. The choreography oscillates from cheesy to overly contrived sexy.

As the show draws to a close, I use underscoring again to draw out the comedy of my anxiety-laden experience of waiting for my test result. The children's song “Tick Tock Clock” provides a comic counterpoint to both my overly anxious musings about HIV/AIDS, and my neurotic search for the perfect outfit to wear when I receive my result. And just when the narrative might become a little too serious, we hear the strains of instrumental music from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, and a beautiful sequined shirt descends into the theatre.

How to end the show?

Erin (the director) and I had countless discussions over how to end the show (it's a conversation that continues presently), and, as the writer, I had some competing impulses about how and when to end the show. First, I wanted to avoid the trope of depicting myself as either the “victim” or the “hero.” Both tropes reduce the multifaceted potential of personal narrative to only two possible outcomes, failure or redemption, and belie the nuanced complexity of life experience. Secondly, I made a choice not to reveal my HIV status at the end of the show as the narrative resolution. I had concerns about normalizing my body through a declaration of my own HIV-negativity, and I wasn't sure if revealing my HIV-negativity would enact a kind of “moral” that would implicitly re-pathologize the bodies of HIV-positive people. Also, I wasn't comfortable at that time revealing my test result in the performance. I felt that the resolution of my personal story wasn't the most important thing, and I wanted the audience to seek their own resolution perhaps through getting tested themselves.

After I had decided to resist what I thought were more obvious ways of resolving the story, I had some difficulty writing a conclusion to this performance. Before deciding on the ending for this version, I experimented with a few different approaches: first, I rewrote the Notre Dame monologue and placed it as the final scene. In the rewritten version, I encourage the audience to join me in the burning of Notre Dame:

So I light a candle, to commemorate our lives, and the lives of millions who have died from AIDS. But I realize that one candle isn't enough to deal with the enormity of AIDS. And so I light a few more candles, and then a few more after that, and I look down at my hands and I know I'm ready to build something new. And I know that all of you are out there on the plaza, and the reason we've come here today is so we can build a new monument, a better monument, something for all of us that will last forever. And so I find all the candles I can, a million-billion candles, that create huge, scorching flames, that burn and burn and burn away two thousand years of guilt (Leija, draft dated 1/14/07).

I meant the burning of the cathedral to symbolize a communal burning of shame and sexual repression. Yet, I had not effectively created a "we" within the narrative, and so this monologue seemed to arrive out of thin air. Further, I received some questions about why I would want to burn down a structure about which I had written so affectionately.

Next, I imagined a campy epilogue that would frame my performance as a trashy nightclub act:

I'm a washed-up chanteuse doing her worn-out cabaret act in a mostly empty, dimly lit bar downtown. My song is a sassy, campy song. It is not about guilt or shame; it's about enjoyment—enjoying how good it feels to be "bad." I go on every night, rain or shine—I've been doing it for years and I'll be doing it for years to come. This bar would be smoky, except nobody is there (Leija, draft date 1/29/07).

I think this particular approach had some promise, but when I performed this ending in context it didn't seem to connect with the rest of the performance. This approach felt like a campy trap door through which to escape, a camp cliché that wasn't quite an actual ending.

Finally, we developed the sequined shirt moment—probably the most visually exuberant and campiest moment in the piece—followed by a brief epilogue, which is, on the surface, about being "seduced" by Catholicism. The sequined shirt itself was a kind of "deus ex machina," a theatrical exit strategy that relied on the visual language of uniforms developed over the course of the show. Here the Catholic school uniform is restaged as queer spectacle, the ultimate appropriation and reconfiguring of "the uniform" through a wonderful excess of sequins, lush orchestral music, and dazzling white light. The sequined shirt suggests an optimism, excitement, and humor that is unparalleled in the rest of the story, and represents the potential for transformation and renewal through strategically queering and camping uniformity. In that way, I think that the sequined shirt should be the "moral" of the story (if there is such a thing): "queering" becomes a kind of spectacular strategy for confronting a complex set of social issues.

And perhaps I should have left it at that; still I wanted the opportunity to merge all of the themes from the show.

The final text momentarily reflects on Catholicism, although much criticized in the show's narrative, as an institutional security blanket, and one that, like heteronormativity or heteronormative assimilation, can be dangerously appealing in moments of personal crisis. And I'm flirting, just briefly, with that notion. Maybe this is another kind of clichéd resolution, but I try to diffuse the cliché quickly. By eroticizing

some aspects of Catholic ritual, I mean to disarm the power that these rituals have; I want to invoke the potential to eroticize anything, even the most oppressive of institutions, and through these erotics maybe find a new kind of power. In this show, I don't have many positive things to say about Catholicism, and so this kind of "flirting" may seem to come from nowhere. Indeed, if one views this as a literal return to the Church, I do think that it stands in contradiction to my more explicit anti-Catholic sentiments. Perhaps this is a moment of disidentification: I am clearly delighted by the over-the-top queerness of the sequined shirt and its suggestion that renewal awaits in queerness. But I have a vague nostalgia for the rituals of Catholicism. I'm caught between two identities. Ultimately, I reject the church. I refer to it as an ex-lover—I'm intrigued more by the idea of how we could have ever been compatible (if we ever were). The church then is only appealing as superficial, meaningless nostalgia, and the sequined shirt is far more compelling.

Interestingly, when we inserted this final scene, we never intended for it to be read as a *literal* return to the Church. We conceived this ending as a metaphoric return to the bathhouse. Visually, I return to the square of white light that is imbued with the meanings of both the confessional and the private bathhouse cubical. I hoped the audience would see it as a hybrid space of sexuality, surveillance, voyeurism, risk, judgment, and pleasure—a layering of the various thematic juxtapositions in the narrative. I thought that this final monologue would queer the confessional, sexualize it, and give me power over it, and simultaneously convey that I had taken control of my sexual health. Although I could be and had been "seduced" by any number of things in the narrative, I now knew how to proceed as the "seducer." By using the language of seduction, I imagined that the audience could substitute the word "church" for whatever they liked—a kind of homoerotic "Mad Libs" allowing for erotic empowerment. I had hoped the transformation into the sequined shirt would visually emphasize a transformation layered into the spoken text.

I'll be the first to admit that my intentions here aren't completely clear. And I speculated during our rehearsals that this moment could read as an unproductive contradiction. However, we felt that the moment was layered in sufficiently interesting ways, and that we could trust the audience to read the moment on a number of levels that weren't literally about returning to the Church. At the very least, the narrative accumulation and complexity would show the audience that this was not the same confessional from the beginning of the show, and maybe, by the end, it wasn't even a confessional at all.

When all was said and done though, I wasn't satisfied with this ending. Like the other endings, it never quite worked. But I had a deadline to meet, a show to produce, and so I committed to this ending. That's a part of this process just as much as anything else. I suspect that my contradictory impulses and the awkwardness of the ending could be resolved through a new final scene. If the opportunity arises for more performances of *sins* in the future, the final scene will be the first revision I undertake. I have in mind another alternate ending that would bring me *literally* (rather than metaphorically) back to the bathhouse several months later. In this context, I would reveal my test result (negative) and discuss my desire to become an HIV testing counselor. Indeed, the reason I became a counselor myself was so that HIV testing and HIV prevention would be demystified, so that I could understand testing and prevention in a more logical way, and alleviate my own anxieties and the anxieties of others in regards to sexual practice. And most importantly, I would affirm the things I value about the bathhouse, its sexual allure

and permissiveness, and affirm my participation. Although, I had experienced risk and the potential for risk still exists, I would still enjoy the pleasures of the bathhouse by navigating those risks with a different kind of education and a renewed optimism. This new ending would present an opportunity to portray the pleasures of negotiating risk and provide a counterpoint to the anxieties that I describe in the narrative. This narrative moment would be preceded by the visual spectacle of the sequined shirt, and foreground a more literal moment of transformation in the spoken narrative.

Conclusion: Questions of Audience

When I create performances, I generally think first about writing for other gay men. Rarely do I think about making thematic or aesthetic choices that might be appealing to a broader audience. I am a gay community-identified artist, and live performance offers me the opportunity to summon that community (or some version of that community) in a physical space. As I've already mentioned, queer performance serves an important intra-community purpose by bringing community members together and offering them the opportunity to affirm, restore, and challenge their belief in community as well as negotiate the most important issues of the community.

Some dismiss this aspect of queer performance practice as preaching to the converted. In their article "Preaching to Converted," David Román and Tim Miller deftly unpack the problematics of this dismissal. They argue that queer performance provides a space where "members of our community profess and perform to us their beliefs so that we in the assembled crowd can take these performances and incorporate their insights into our own continuing struggle to live in a deeply homophobic world," and that to dismiss this aspect of queer performance "assumes a political stability for lesbians and gays that is as naïve as it is politically dangerous (Miller & Román 5)." Claiming the audience is "converted" suggests that the spectator has a fixed identity and that the "queer community" itself never changes. Miller and Román suggest that audiences are never truly "converted," and that live performances serve a similar function as religious church services in providing an opportunity for participants to continually reflect upon and renew their communal beliefs (Miller & Román 4).

By foregrounding the metaphor of confession in *sins with all my heart*, I wanted to more deliberately draw on the church-like characteristics of queer solo performance, specifically the power of communal renewal. Whereas the Catholic confessional of my youth places the power of renewal into the hands of an individual priest, I wanted to relocate that power into a community of gay peers and other progressives drawn to my work. By removing the priest and inserting "the community," I am asking community members to evaluate my interpretation of events and compare it with their own. Although staging this work offers me the opportunity to test my own experiences and values within the context of the assembled community, I'm not particularly interested in the audience offering me "forgiveness" or "absolution" on a personal level. I simply offer my story as a departure point for the audience; a confession within which I trust the spectators will find their own kinds of identifications—perhaps through recalling their own experiences of vulnerability and risk, and of negotiating sex and health in a confusing "post-AIDS" culture. For those gay men who come to the performance, my intention is that *sins* will encourage new confessions between friends and sexual partners about sexual ethics and HIV/AIDS, and possibly lead to conversations in the broader community

beyond the performance space. By confessing to each other, we have the power to rephrase “sins” as our communal challenges. We look to each other not in judgment, but with a communal energy of creative solution making.

The reality of creating this work in my geographic location, in a space that isn’t specifically queer, means that I can’t necessarily depend on a mostly queer audience. My situation in a graduate art program in the suburban Midwest means that the audience for this work (and most of my work in the past three years) is mostly art school and other university affiliates. But regardless, a function of this work is to create a queer space, to queer the space of the Video Studio, and make it a place where, for the duration of the performance, queer identity and queer concerns are placed front and center. I believe this project stages an intervention by inverting a normally heteronormative space. If I can’t have an entirely queer audience (and, I suppose, one rarely can), I can, at the very least, require an audience to inhabit a queer space for duration of the performance.

Indeed, within this “queer space” that I attempt to create are heterosexual allies, well-intentioned men and women interested in “diversity,” perhaps seeking to educate themselves and bolster their own beliefs in multiculturalism. There are social activists who work “in-the-field” at service organizations and other non-profits, there are those who have varying levels of familiarity with LGBT history and with the history of performance, and there are those who work in Public Health and other health-related fields that address HIV/AIDS. Ultimately, I expect that individual interpretations will vary depending on who is viewing the work. Amongst those that viewed *sins*, some felt that *sins* spoke to more universal themes of coming-of-age, spirituality, human mortality, and sexual intimacy, some saw their own personal experience portrayed in my story of unprotected sex and HIV testing anxiety, and some experienced the work as a kind of preventive educational theatre that addressed issues of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse.

After seeing the performance, some of my colleagues at the University Health Services suggested that it would be a very marketable show for the college/youth health circuit. I was surprised because I never thought about intentionally making *sins with all my heart* an overtly educational performance. Certainly, I intended the piece to be provocative and elicit a dialogue. But I’m wary of the spectre of intentionally educational theatre appearing on the horizon bringing with it the notion that educational theatre is heavy on message and lacking in artistic nuance. For artists whose work addresses matters of community health, they risk being “unmasked as facilitator or therapist” and “losing the status of artist (Mac Dougall & Yoder 1).” Still, the possibility of presenting this work in a college/youth health setting is appealing to me; it would open up many performance opportunities that in turn would lead to many opportunities to engage different communities and revise the work. Public health and performance practitioners have suggested that performing artists can “respond to the afflictions of the collective body such as environmental decay, poverty, drug abuse, and violence by directly addressing the social context and creating public forums to seek solutions, whereas physicians tend to pull back into biotechnology and to medicalize social problems (Mac Dougall & Yoder 2).” In my case, after a year of counseling mostly college-aged men and women, I know that my story about drinking too much and engaging in risky behaviors would have some resonance, and could create a forum for HIV/STD prevention.

If I were to present the show in an educational context, I would want to follow each performance with a talkback. I think that offering an opportunity for people to connect with each other after seeing the performance could have a powerful effect on

local communities and the kinds of conversations they have about sexuality and HIV prevention. Additionally, since I leave my own HIV status unresolved in the performance, perhaps a talkback is really the space for finding resolution. A talkback literally places the questions back into the hands of individuals and communities, and allows them to determine the best answers for themselves. As I've continued discussions with my colleagues at Health Services, they have asked me to use this performance as part of an in-service training for new HIV testing counselors in the 2007-2008 academic year. The performance will be presented on DVD and I will facilitate a post-viewing discussion. This training will be the first opportunity to try the talkback model, and I'm sure that the conversation will be insightful for both the trainees as well as for my own thinking about my work as "educational."

The line between intention and audience reception is sometimes not as direct as the artist hopes. And maybe the real "sin" here is that my intention to be community-identified and community-centered is not always clear in the work. As I reflect back, perhaps I could have made this intention more obvious in a few ways: first, by implementing talkbacks like I suggest above. Second, like Tim Miller does in many of his works, I could have engaged the audience in more explicit ways to create a communal "us." Miller spends a lot of energy in conjuring a temporary community in the performance space by creating a more deliberately interactive experience and trusting that the audience will follow him on the interactive journey. While I speak casually to the audience at the beginning of the show in a more interactive way, I lose this interactive feeling at certain times in favor of a more scripted approach, and I don't work as consistently as Miller does in his narratives to continually affirm the gathered community. This is an aspect of my process that I look forward to developing in future performances. However, for *sins*, even though my narrative may not explicitly conjure a community, the act of turning to the audience in "confession" implies an underlying optimism and belief in the power of a community to mend itself and its constituents.

In the narrative, I choose to remain HIV-indeterminate and to mark indeterminacy as its own identity category. I think this is relevant, because when you consider the three month window period in HIV testing, you find that many gay men, if they are sexually active, experience prolonged periods of HIV indeterminacy at one point or another. Indeterminacy describes the contemporary moment: discourses around gay male sexuality and identity, monogamy and promiscuity, and risk and health are still in major flux. Crisis and post-crisis perspectives continue to compete for attention in an increasingly conservative (gay and mainstream) political climate. As a writer and artist, and as an individual, I'm not sure what the resolution to these issues should or will be. And through the performance, I stage a kind of thematic indeterminacy—the tone is never exactly campy or exactly serious, HIV is never exactly a crisis, spaces are never entirely public or entirely private, neither social control nor personal agency prevails. With this thematic indeterminacy, I try to summon an in between-ness, an experience of not-knowing that has its own specific pleasures and anxieties. *sins with all my heart* gave me an opportunity to lay out some questions about contemporary gay male sexuality that are important to me. Additionally, this thesis document has allowed me to investigate some of the complexities of those questions.

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Appendix A – Annotated Script

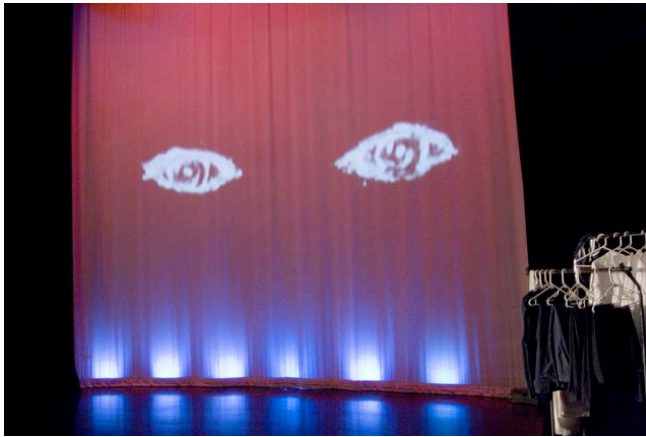
sins with all my heart

an original solo performance

written and performed by James Leija

developed and directed for the stage by Erin Markey

Prologue



A single light illuminates a two-tiered clothing rack. A row of navy blue pants and a row of white dress shirts hangs on the clothing rack along with some navy blue ties, a white fanny pack, and a white towel. The navy blue pants and white shirts are suggestive of school uniforms. A row of neatly arranged white tennis shoes sits on the floor beneath the rack. Jim will visit this “closet” many times during the performance. A single white chair is next to the rack.

As the audience arrives, they hear contemporary Catholic hymns playing over the sound system. On the cyc curtain, animated eyes are projected. The eyes are very small at first, but they grow larger as the audience convenes in the space. The eyes continue surveilling the audience with great intensity.

Eyes fade. Lights up. Jim arrives onstage wearing a navy blue bathrobe. He looks at the audience. The following text is partially improvised each night:)

Hi everyone! Oh my, thank you all for being here. This is so exciting, to have you all here for the premiere of “sins with all my heart,” my M.F.A. thesis performance. So, there are a few things we should get out of the way, right away, before the show starts. You should know what you’re getting into here. So I just want to give you a full disclosure: there are...over one hundred light cues in the show, there are cartwheels, and there are over sixty thousand sequins! So it was worth the price of admission!

Alright then. Let’s get started. *(Jim places the chair center stage.)* Lights!

Scene One

(A spotlight center stage. Jim removes his bathrobe and reveals a Catholic school boy uniform: too-short, too-tight navy blue pants, a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, a tiny navy blue clip-on tie, white socks, and white velcro tennis shoes:)

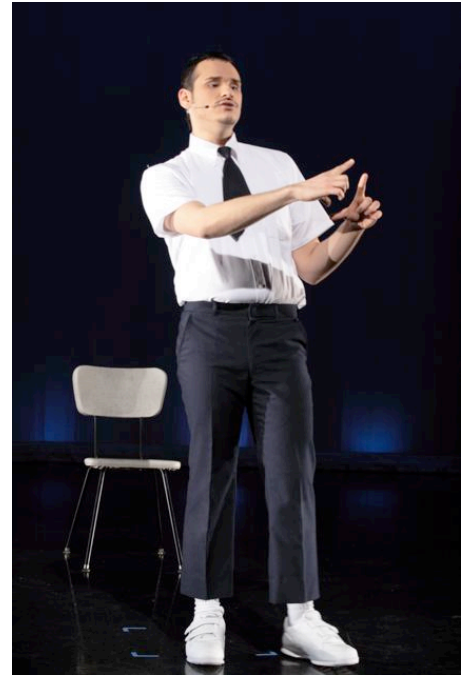
I'm six years old in the first grade at St. Germaine Catholic grade school. And I'm getting ready to make my first confession. And so my mother is helping me memorize the "Act of Contrition." Oh my God I am sorry for my sins with all my heart in choosing to do wrong and failing to do good I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things I firmly intend with your help to do penance to sin no more and avoid whatever leads me to sin amen.

We say the prayer every night, in my bedroom, before I go to bed. We say the usual prayers, Hail Mary and Our Father, and Now, I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to take amen. I don't know why they make children say that prayer, because it's all about suddenly dying in your sleep, like at any moment you could die, and then who gets your soul if the Lord doesn't get it? Where does it go? Is there some kind of lottery? Does it just go to hell? And that's what confession is about, making sure that in case you die you don't go to hell.

So I'm in the first grade and I'm thinking a lot about hell. And I'm trying to think really hard about what I could have done that was bad enough that I would go to hell. In school, we're learning about sin. We get this great workbook. It has a shiny silver cover that I'm very attracted to. It's like a giant square sequin. The workbook tells us it's very important to make a "good" confession. It doesn't really say what a "bad" confession is, only that we must make a "good" confession. And so we learn about the commandments and more about sin and I take it all very seriously because it's a grown-up sacrament. It's the first sacrament I get to choose to do. It's not like baptism, which just sort of happens to you whether you like it or not.

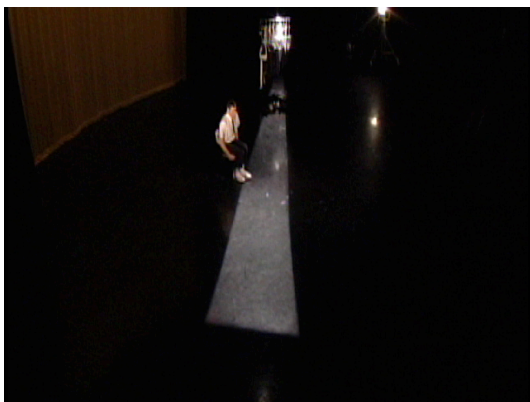
I guess I'm not really choosing it, because it's just what you do when you're a kid going to Catholic school and you're in a Catholic family, but it seems like a choice, and so I take it very seriously because I want to be a grown-up, and I want my parents to be proud of me, and I don't want to go to hell.

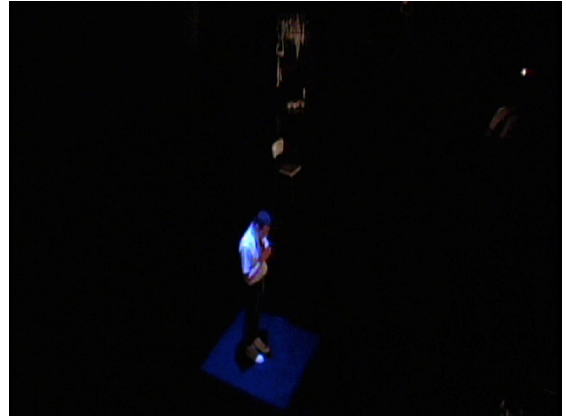
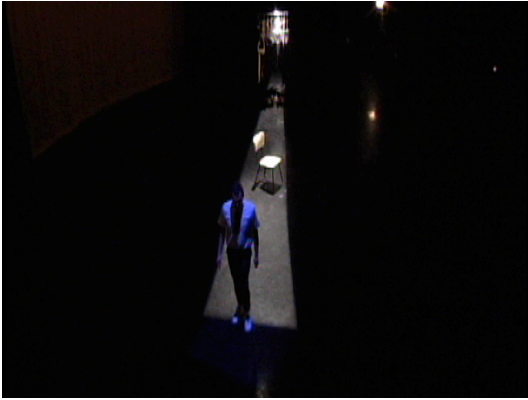
So, the big day arrives and my first grade teacher makes us line up in the hallway, and this always happens if we go anywhere as a whole class: we have to line up in the hallway and everybody has to be all still and quiet before we can move, like a marching band or soldiers. *(A Catholic hymn fades up. Jim sits in the chair).*



We file into the church and we're the only ones there. I sit in the church, in my school uniform, my little navy blue pants, and my navy tie, and sometimes I'm wearing a navy blue sweater. And you would think it would be easy to find matching shades of navy blue because so many private schools use navy blue in their uniforms, but the shades of navy never match. And it really bothers me. And it will bother me for the rest of my childhood.

(A Pathway of light appears. The pathway begins in the closet and ends in the confessional, a single square of white light.) As each person goes into the confessional and comes out again, I get another seat closer to going in. *(Jim scoots his chair forward into the pathway.)* Then it's my turn and I go in. *(He walks down the pathway into the confessional as the Catholic hymn swells.)*





I sit behind a screen even though the priest knows it's me anyway. I get that feeling you get, like when you're waiting for an airplane to take off, the feeling of being really nauseated but excited, the feeling that something really exciting is about to happen, but you might throw up.

I say, bless me father for I have sinned. This is my first confession. I have taken God's name in vain. I've yelled at my parents. The priest tells me, do something nice for your parents, stop taking God's name in vain, and say a rosary. These are my penances. Then: Oh my God I am sorry for my sins with all my heart in choosing to do wrong and failing to do I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things I firmly intend with your help to do penance to sin no more and avoid whatever leads me to sin amen. *(Music suddenly stops.)*

And then it's over. I'm forgiven. I'm absolved. *(Jim walks out of the confessional and unbuttons his pants. The pants fall around his ankles.)* And I walk out and that's it, my first confession. It's easy. *(The Catholic hymn plays as Jim removes his pants and shoes and returns to the closet.)*

Scene Two

(The opening strains of Bette Midler's "From a Distance" begin to play. Jim changes into a different pair of navy blue pants. This time the pants are baggy and pleated. He pulls on a navy blue sweater vest. He wears a pair of battered white high-top tennis shoes. He moves into the light and sings in a high-pitched falsetto, as if he were in a boy choir:)

From a distance the world looks blue and green,
and the snow-capped mountains white.
From a distance the ocean meets the stream,
and the eagle takes to flight. *(Music fades.)*

It's 1990, the height of the Persian Gulf War, and Bette Midler's smash hit recording of "From a Distance" seizes the airwaves. And during our school talent show, my fifth grade class gets to sing Bette Midler's song, at the top of our lungs in front of the whole school:

(Music rises, sung in falsetto:)
And God is watching us, God is watching us,

God is watching us from a distance. (*Music fades.*)

We begin each day with a series of prayers. First, we look to the crucifix that hangs above the chalkboard, make the sign of the cross, Our Father, who Art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Next, we turn our attention to a large yellow ribbon hanging on the wall, and ask, God please protect our American soldiers! Finally, we turn to the flag, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under... (*Music swells. Sung in falsetto:*)

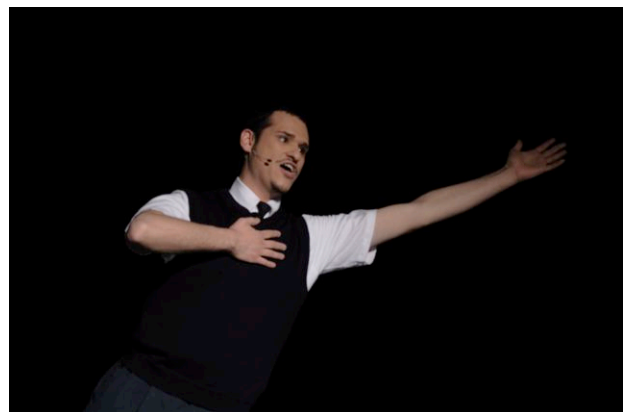
God is watching us, God is watching us,
(*Jim switches to his full, adult voice:*)
God is watching us, from a distance. (*Music fades.*)

God is watching us! Is God some kind of fulltime voyeur? Think about, what if we're just reality T.V. for God? What if *my life* is just reality T.V. for God? Just a cheap disposable thrill that God watches a few nights a week while he's eating his lean cuisine macaroni and cheese or munching on 94% fat-free Meijer Butterific microwave popcorn?

If God is watching us, did God watch when I looked at Scott? Tall, dark, and handsome Scott who wore his Boy Scout uniform to school every Tuesday. Oh yes, a nine-year-old man in a uniform. And how one Tuesday, I turned around in my little fifth grade desk, and sat there on my knees, fingering the beads on his uniform that he had earned for one honorable deed or another. "What's this one for?" (*In the voice of the teacher:*) "James Leija! What are you *doing?*" Did God see that?

And if God is watching us, does that mean, in that very same year, 1991, God watched as I, for the very first time, masturbated with cherry flavored Vaseline while watching naked, wet Sylvester Stallone emerge from the shower in "Stop! Or my mom will shoot!"?

Should I be worried that I might bore God? (*Jim sits in the chair and levels with audience:*) How should I keep my ratings up? Does God like bad behavior? Do I have to be one of those trashy, over-the-top reality T.V. characters like Simon Cowell in order to keep God from just falling asleep on the couch or changing the channel on me or, worse, voting my character off the show altogether! And reality T.V. isn't even reality anyway: we're performing ourselves and God is the audience, and we know he's watching, and he knows we know he's watching, and so we make certain "acting" choices because of it?



But then again, how do we even know if God is there at all? Maybe he just left one day, and now we're just being recorded on his TiVo until the end of time. Because if God is watching us, he doesn't seem to be doing much more than watching. Why the fuck doesn't God do anything?

Maybe he *can't* do anything but passively watch, an omniscient couch potato, a fat old man with a giant beer belly and a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos... (*Music rises. Jim stands and sings:*)

And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us,
From a distance.

Scene Three

(In the distance, we hear the sounds of a busy European plaza. Jim places the chair by the rack, and strips down to a white t-shirt and white briefs. He puts on a baggy white polo shirt and a pair of navy blue pants that goes almost up to his nipples. The pants are tight and constrict his stomach. Around his waist he wears a white fanny pack:)



I'm 16. And I look like this. I'm standing on the plaza in front of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. I'm looking up at the western facade of the cathedral from the ground below. I'm gonna throw up. This mountain was made with human hands. No cranes, or bulldozers. The only machinery was faith: faith in God, faith in reaching heaven, and faith in something far greater than individual lives. I look at the cathedral, and I feel the ache in their muscles, the sweat on their leathery hands, the scrape of their tough calluses, the stiffness in their backs, broken fingers, broken hands, the sunburn and the burn of the

cold, and the higher and higher they build, the ground gets further and further away, and they feel sick themselves, and they might fall off. The people who built this church, who would dedicate their lives to this church, would never see it completed. Almost two hundred years from start to finish. Two centuries. Why would they start something they knew they couldn't finish?

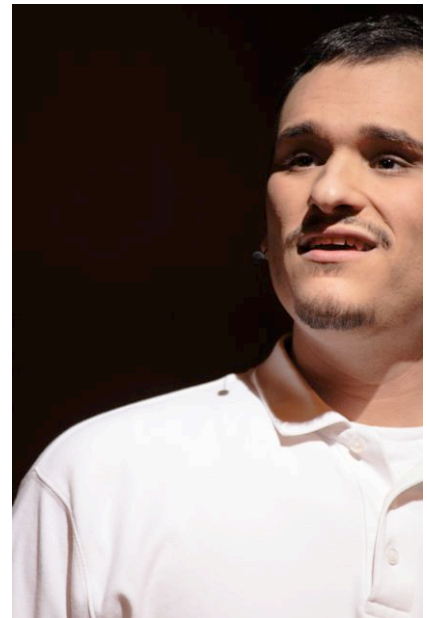
(The lights change instantly. We hear a boozy pipe organ accompaniment. It's all musical theatre, all song and dance, all come-to-my-party-we'll-have-a-fabulous-time. Sung:)

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is.

(Lights change again, back to the previous mood:)

The cathedral's rose window glares at me. Hundreds of hands over hundreds of years that hauled and sculpted and mortared. *(On the screen is a dozen animated eyes all gazing, surveilling, watching.)* It is blood and flesh, and the naïve notion that if we only try hard enough, we can reach high enough and touch God, we can look God straight in the face, and finally get some answers. It's violent. It is cold and stony and menacing; it looks down on me of little faith. It demands that I acknowledge my insignificance, insists on my insignificance.

I could climb all the way to the top of this thing, and fall all the way back down. I could die right here. And the cathedral will whisper, "I have been here for 800 years and I will be here for 800 more. Long after you are nothing but dust."



(A single spotlight center stage. The boozy pipe organ plays along. Sung, in the voice of the cathedral:)

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is.

(Light change to the cathedral interior, shadows from stained glass windows on the floor.)

I walk into the expansive, dark, dank interior of the cathedral, drop a few coins in a box, and, I light a few candles, like my mother and grandma Miller always did. Blessings. I know I'll have to leave the Church behind in a few years.

I know what you must be saying to yourselves: if that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all? Oh, no, not me. I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment, For I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you, when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath, I'll be saying to myself:

(Again, the lights change instantly. Again, we hear a boozy pipe organ accompaniment. This time it's joyous and exciting. A celebration. Sung.)

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is.



(In the distance, the cathedral bells toll. Jim runs to the rack and quickly removes his pants and shirt. He wears only a white t-shirt and navy blue briefs.)

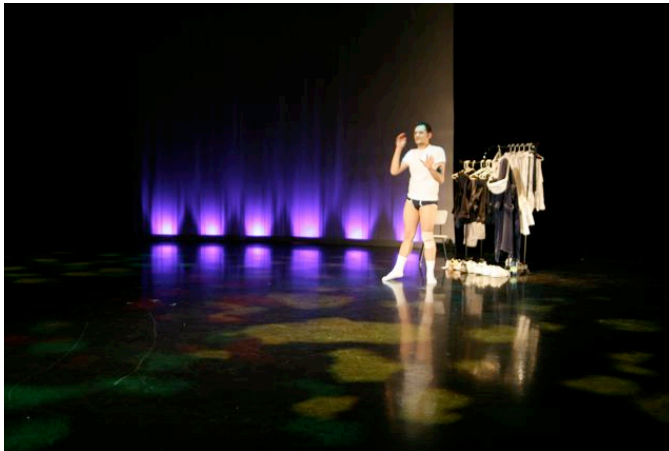
Scene Four

(Lights up. Jim is still in his t-shirt and briefs.)

I'm eighteen and college is on the horizon. I confess: I come out to my friends, to other gay people, to my mom.

I replace the Catholic Church with gay. I replace weekly Sunday morning mass with weekly Friday nights at the gay bar. *(Jim slicks his hair into a faux-hawk with pomade.)* It's Friday. *(Techno dance track begins: "Let's get soaking wet!")* *Lights change to the interior of a dance club.)* I'm in line outside the bar with this evening's group of eager and willing

congregants whose search for fulfillment will begin on the dance floor and maybe end in the bedroom. I believe in the divine power of smoke and lights and cheap drinks, and I believe in life after love, and the congregational hymns provided by our most holy divas, Madonna or Whitney or Cher, and we move our bodies to the beat, the DJ watches over us like God himself and, of course, there's always a drag queen or two; the high priestesses of Friday night. *(Cut dance track.)*



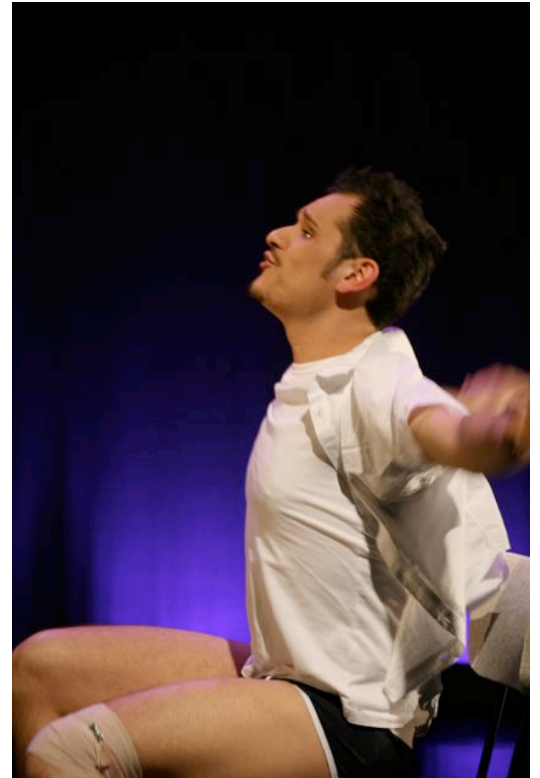
After my first HIV test, I become a kind of safe sex evangelist. I am that guy who is *always* talking with my friends about safe sex, answering their questions, and taking every opportunity to bring out the condoms and lube and pass them around like the hostess of some kind of strange post-modern Tupperware party. *(Jim removes some lube samples from his fanny pack. He says, in a thick Midwestern accent.)* “Ok, now put a dab of the water based lube on your right hand and the silicone based lube on your left hand. Now rub your fingers together. Feel the difference?!”

Scene Five

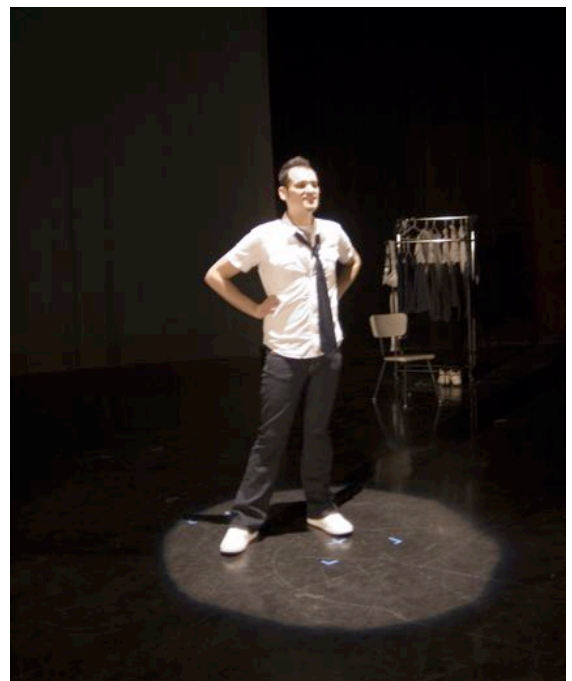
(Jim places the chair in profile at center stage. 1950's orchestral music begins, “Gay Spirits.” It's all strings, and very Doris Day. Jim looks into an imaginary mirror then rushes back to the rack to find the perfect white shirt, the perfect navy blue pants, the perfect tie, the perfect white tennis shoes. This time though it's stylish blue jeans, a tight white shirt, cute shoes—perfect club wear! He dresses as he talks:)

I'm 25 and living in Chicago and for the first time I'm experiencing what it's like to be a gay man living in a big city. Suddenly, the world is at my fingertips: I go to gay bookstores and gay restaurants. I go to a different gay bar every night of the week. I meet every possible flavor of gay man I could ever want: younger, older, beefy, skinny, hairy, smooth, butch, femme, top, bottom, white boys, black boys, latin boys, and polish-mexican-greek-multi-culti-ethnic boys! The intellectual types, the pop cultural types, the fashionistas, the Abercrombie boys, the daddies, the bears, the leathermen, lawyers, doctors, waiters, artists, pharmacists, consultants, graduate students, young professionals, street kids, and hustlers...Chicago is an embarrassment of riches, an overwhelming

cascade of sexual possibilities, and I go absolutely wild... (*Jim twirls and dances around the stage. Suddenly the music changes to a comical march, "Parade of the Clowns." Jim hurries to make his final preparations and moves the chair away.*)



And when you're 25, and you've just arrived in the urban gayborhood of your dreams, you know that HIV is there, but where? Sure, there's more risk, but everyone is so healthy, so athletic, so ready for just about anything. And the excitement, the thrill of it all, carries me away...

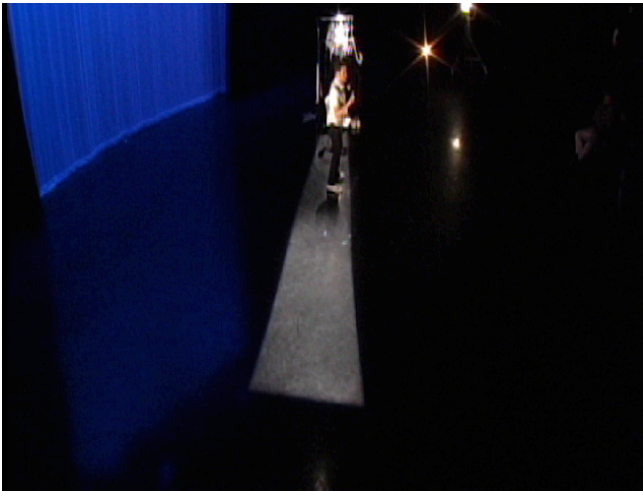


(The path of light reappears, but this time the path is the city street. The next section is highly stylized with music and choreography. Jim dances his way down the city street.)

I'm walking down North Halsted street in Chicago with my friend Jake. *(Cartwheel!)* We pass a rather non-descript, three story brick building, unmarked except for it's address in bold yellow numbers: *(Cartwheel!)* 3-2-4-6. "What's that place?" I ask curiously. "That's Steamworks. It's a bathhouse," Jake replies. "Really!?" Since when are there still bathhouses? I thought they were like some kind of joke prop from seventies porn, like handlebar moustaches. Did you ever go?" "Trashy! It's just an STD waiting to happen." "Yeah."

(Jim twirls his hips in a Bob Fosse style dance move. He speaks in a snooty English accent:) But, I've left the provincial countryside of my youth. I've left my small town gay life behind for a spiritual, sexual pilgrimage to the big gay city with its multitude of great gay monuments and all it's decadent urban rituals. And going to the bathhouse is an adult ritual, a grown up ritual, and it's not for everyone. *(Dance continues up and down the path of light.)*

(Voiceover:) The first time, I went to the bathhouse because it felt important, it felt like a sacrament, an opportunity to understand my sexual self more completely. What lay behind the bathhouse's nondescript exterior? *(Music ends. Jim lands in front of the square of light. Now the square represents the door to the bathhouse.)*

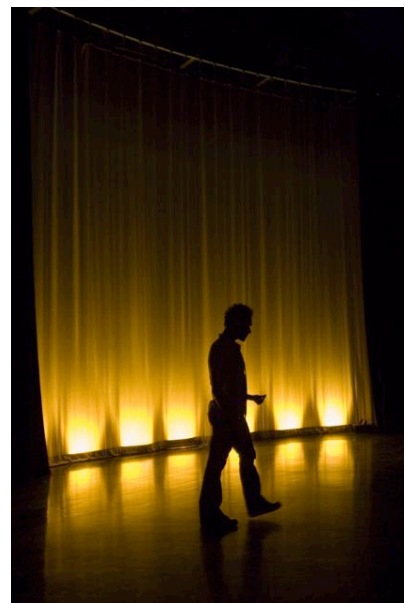
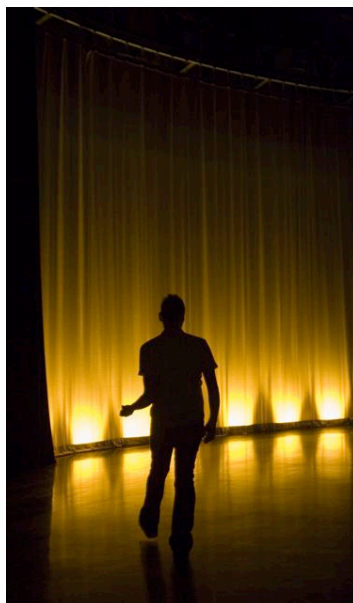


(Spoken:) I wanted to know what it was like on the inside. On the inside, I felt disoriented, out of place, not having any experience with the rituals of the bathhouse. I studied the sexual groupings: people you'd never see together at the bar, younger men with older men, ugly people with pretty people, men piled so high that you could climb all the way to the top and fall all the way back down again. You could die right there. And the cathedral will whisper, "I have been here for 800 years and I will be here for 800 more..."

The bathhouse was permissive, a cathedral designed for the rituals of sucking and fucking, and dedicated to the gospel of no muss, no fuss, casual safe sex—sex that doesn't depend on you caring about someone else's feelings, sex that's not about climbing the social ladder, sex with people that are otherwise wildly inappropriate for you. And I say safe sex, because everywhere I turned there were hundreds of free condoms for the taking, and instead of a vending machine filled with chips and peanuts, it was full of specialty condoms and lube.

And so, I watched. I watched other people cruise and get off. I leaned against a wall in that intimate public place, my arms folded, my eyes fixed, commanding, watching everything, everyone at once. I was God. Some of them knew I was watching, so they performed for me, keeping me enticed, seeking my approval. And even if I was just *watching* other people have sex, it was exciting. It felt like freedom—the sexual freedom of 1970's, the freedom I always felt like I missed out on, the wild sexual liberation of the frenzied post-Stonewall era, drugs everywhere, disco everywhere, men everywhere, booze everywhere, jazz everywhere, we were coming out of the closet and marching into the streets, and hitting the sheets with whomever we wanted, whenever we wanted. Hell, we didn't even need sheets. And, the vague notion that it was the best of times, before AIDS.

And here I am, stuck in the new millennium, the era of domestic partnerships, and same sex marriages, and gay adoption, and monogamy and propriety, and matching end tables from the Pottery Barn. And that's all fine, but it's not sexy. I went because I wanted to taste the sexiness of gay liberation, to feel like gay sex could still be a radical, political act. *(Lights change to the interior of a dance club. Techno dance track, "Satisfaction," plays loudly. The next section is highly stylized, choreographed, and spoken in the rhythm of the techno beat:)*





Two dollar vodka-lemonades, two at a time.
 Jake. On my right arm. Girlfriends always travel in packs.
 Spin. College night. Belmont, Halsted.
 You spin me right round baby.
 Looking good, buzzed head, tank top
 Tanned brown skin makes me look thinner. Slimmer.
 Summer, gorgeous summer.

Two more, two dollar vodka-lemonades.

Two more, two dollar vodka-lemonades
 I want to get laid.
 This crowd is too young for my taste,
 Cruel, cruel, cruel summer.

Two more, two dollar vodka-lemonades,
 Too good to be true.
 Too true to be good.

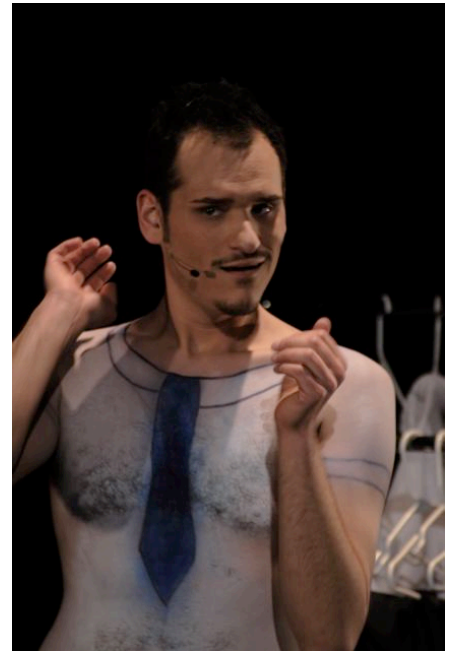
The last song I hear before I ditch Jake:
 Push me, and then just touch me, til I can get my satisfaction.
 Satisfaction.
 Robots from a command center deep inside my pants.
 Push me, and then just touch me, til I can get my satisfaction.

I stumble out onto the street, with determination.
 You don't think it's possible,
 but you *can* stumble with determination.
 Determined to go to 3-2-4-6. To do more than watch.
 I was tired of watching.
 I was into doing.
 I was tired of watching.
 That's what I'm in-to,
 That's what I'm in-to, ding!
 Do it, do it, get some, get some.

(Jim returns to the rack and strips down to briefs and a t-shirt.)

Oh my God, I am so sorry for my sins,
 with all...my...heart.

Vodka-infused courage lands me in front of the bathhouse. I pass over my \$15 membership fee to the clerk at the door. And from the clerk I receive a key to a private room and this *(Jim grabs a little white towel from the clothing rack.)* I strip down, like everyone else. *(Jim takes off his t-shirt and we see that his chest is painted as a white shirt with a navy blue tie. Even when he's naked, he can't remove the uniform. He wraps the white towel around his waist.)*
 Little white towels!



The bathhouse is a shadowy place, with dark corners, and throbbing, wordless techno, the heartbeat of the place, urging me forward, get some, get some, do it, do it.

(Jim walks in a circular pattern around the stage. With each step, a lighted pathway illuminates on the stage floor creating a complete circular pathway.) I make my way to the second floor where I find my private room amongst all the other small private rooms on the floor—little cubicles, some with single beds, some with double beds, some with T.V.'s that play porno twenty-four hours a day!



I take a long shower in one of the public shower rooms—I want to make sure people are watching *me* this time. I cruise the steam room looking for attention, the steam growing so thick I can hardly see my own hands. I do a few loops around the porno room. I pick up speed as I circle the hallways, upstairs and down, as my drunken determination propels me, get some, get some, do it, do it.

Eventually I stop in the hallway near my room where two guys are making out. *(The original pathway of light illuminates. Now the pathway is a hallway. Jim walks down the pathway.)* And then one of them gets down and starts sucking the other one off, and while he's getting sucked off, he suddenly grabs me and sticks his tongue in my mouth, and I grab his shaggy hair and kiss him back, and I realize the other guy is sucking me now, and a few more guys join us there in the hallway, sucking and licking and kissing, a sexual traffic jam, a jumble of cocks, and lips, and tongues, and assholes, a galaxy collapsing into itself.

And then our hot imploding galaxy of male sex organs explodes, and I'm pulling one of the guys back to my room. *(The square of white light illuminates. Now it is a private little room. Jim follows the pathway into the square of light.)* A guy about my age with a tight body and a nice ass, and I push him against the wall, and bend him over. I put on a condom, and I start fucking him. But it's not slick enough, it's not wet enough, so we use some spit, and still, it's not slick enough, not wet enough. The boy reaches around and pulls the condom off my dick, and I am so close to coming, that I don't care, so I thrust in. He wants me to come inside of him. He pulls me closer when he knows I'm about to come. *(Music cuts. Silence.)* I can't. I can't. I pull out. I come on the floor.

It lands in a puddle next to the condom.

I can't look at him. I throw his towel at him. Push him out of the room. Slam the door behind him. *(Jim walks out of the square of light. The square disappears.)* I take a cab home. I tear up my membership card into tiny bits and throw it out the window.



(Long pause. To the audience:) A condom is cute and round and comes in different colors. My favorite is red, because you can always see that it's there, that it hasn't slipped or tripped it's way off your dick. Not flesh toned condoms, my least favorite, like I'm not going to notice, like it isn't there, it wasn't there, only for a few seconds. I'm the top—is the condom my responsibility? A condom is sexy because it has to be sexy, because we don't have a choice. It's an accessory to sex, like a handbag or a great pair of black leather shoes. Or an accessory, like an accomplice, you need it to commit the crime. A condom is on the floor instead of on my dick where it should be.

(To calm down. Like breathing. It has no meaning.) Oh my God I am...*(Jim stares at the floor. He seems to will the square of light into the space. The square illuminates. Is it a confessional? A private little room?)* If you fuck up, you should just be able to get forgiveness. *(The square evaporates. Jim removes his towel. Now he wears only his navy blue briefs and the painted-on white shirt and navy blue tie. He moves the chair to center stage.)*

Scene Six

If you think you've been exposed to HIV, there's a window period between infection and detection, so you have to wait a certain amount of time before you can get tested. This is because an HIV test looks for HIV antibodies, the footprints of the virus, not the virus itself. And if you've been infected, it takes most people about 3 months to develop HIV antibodies. And so you have to wait. And so I waited. I waited, and God just watched. *(Jim sits in the chair. He alternates between the voices of patient/confessor, the counselor, and the priest. At times, the three are indistinguishable.)*

So tell me about why you came in today?

It's been six months since my last HIV test. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Bless me father, for I have sinned. It has been ten years since my last confession.

Ten years is a long time.

Yeah.

And was there a particular incident that you're worried about?

Yes. About six months ago.

Why has it been so long since your last confession?

I'm not a Catholic anymore. I'm gay.

People find it difficult sometimes to talk about their sexual experiences, but I just want to assure you that everything you say here is completely confidential. Jesus is always with you, always watching you. I can't even tell anyone that you've been to this office.

If he's always watching, why do I confess to you?

So how are you feeling right now?

I feel guilty. I mean, not about going there, but about the condom. I don't want to feel ashamed.

What's your biggest fear right now?

I'm worried I might be positive. People will think I deserved to get HIV.

The Lord works in mysterious ways. Anyone in your situation would have those fears. And you're doing a good thing by coming here for a test. You're really taking good care of yourself. Could you tell me more about what happened?



(Suddenly, we hear the buoyant introduction of a recognizable show tune. Jim sings:)

I could have danced all night
I could have danced all night
And still have begged for more.

(Light change:)

It's really good that you started out with a condom.

(Light change. Sung:)

I could have spread my wings,
And done a thousand things I've never done before.

(Light change:)

Now what you want to think about is follow-through. So I want you to say three "Hail Mary's"

(Light change. Sung:)

I'll never know what made it so exciting!

(Light change:)

Two "Our Father's"

(Light change. Sung:)

Why all at once my heart took flight.

(Light change:)

So if you find yourself in a situation like this in the future, what would you do differently?

(Light change. Sung:)

I only know when he began to dance with me.

(Light change:)

Make that four "Hail Mary's" and a handful of condoms, there's some lube here too.

(Light change. Sung:)

I could have dance, danced, danced,

(Light change:)

Do you need any dental dams?

(Jim rises from the chair. The lights surge climactically. Sung:)

All night!



Scene Seven

(Instrumental continues underneath. Although the concerns are serious, this next section should be played as comedy. This is the theatre of the absurd.)

I wait a week for my results.

I watch every single movie that was ever made about HIV/AIDS for a term paper I'm writing. An Early Frost. Longtime Companion. Parting Glances. And The Band Played On. Philadelphia. Jeffrey. Angels in America. And the AIDS patient *always* dies in every one of those movies, but at least the gay community is usually there. It's not 1991 out there. ACT-UP isn't out there waiting for me. *(Music ends abruptly.)*

It's pretty quiet in here...you know you want to pray. Don't do it. Don't do it. Let that fucker watch. Flip a coin instead, probably more accurate, heads you're poz, tails you're neg. *(Jim goes to the rack and puts on his first grade pants and shirt.)* It's not 1991 out there, thank God, positive is not a death sentence. Gay men aren't dropping like flies. They have drugs now; you can live 20 years and then maybe there will be a cure. It's not the end of the world. *(Jim looks in the imaginary mirror to fix his outfit. He adjusts his collar and feels his neck.)* Are my glands swollen? Oh my God, they're swollen, I have AIDS, I know it, I fuckin' know it. *(He returns to the rack. Beat.)* Six more days.

(The quiet acoustic guitars of a children's song play in the background, "Tick Tock Clock." The song teaches children how to tell time. Here it is the clock. Jim has an awareness of the time passing slowly.)

I had a dream that I was back at the bathhouse and it had this gorgeous lobby that looked like the lobby of a 1920's art deco theatre with a huge cascading staircase

(The song interrupts Jim:)
 Tick tock, tick tock, tickety tick tock.

(Jim continues, only slightly irritated by the interruption:)
 and my mother and my grandmother were there

(The song interrupts Jim again:)
Tick tock, tick tock, tickety tick tock.

(Jim continues, more irritated this time:)
 wearing beautiful evening gowns made of little white towels and latex condoms.

(The music interrupts yet again:)
Sixty seconds to every minute. Sixty minutes to every hour. Twenty four hours to every day. Tickety tick tock the time away.

(Music stops. Jim waits. To make sure he won't be interrupted again:)
 I had—

(He is immediately interrupted:)
Tick tock, tick tock, tickety tick tock.

(The music stops and Jim hesitantly continues:)
 —a dream that I went in for my test result, and I was both the patient and the HIV counselor. *(The music gets louder and louder but Jim continues and he gets louder and louder.)* I was the scared patient and the rational counselor at the same time, and the moment I walked into the room I knew I was positive, because I was sitting on both sides of the table. The rational me comforting the inconsolable me.

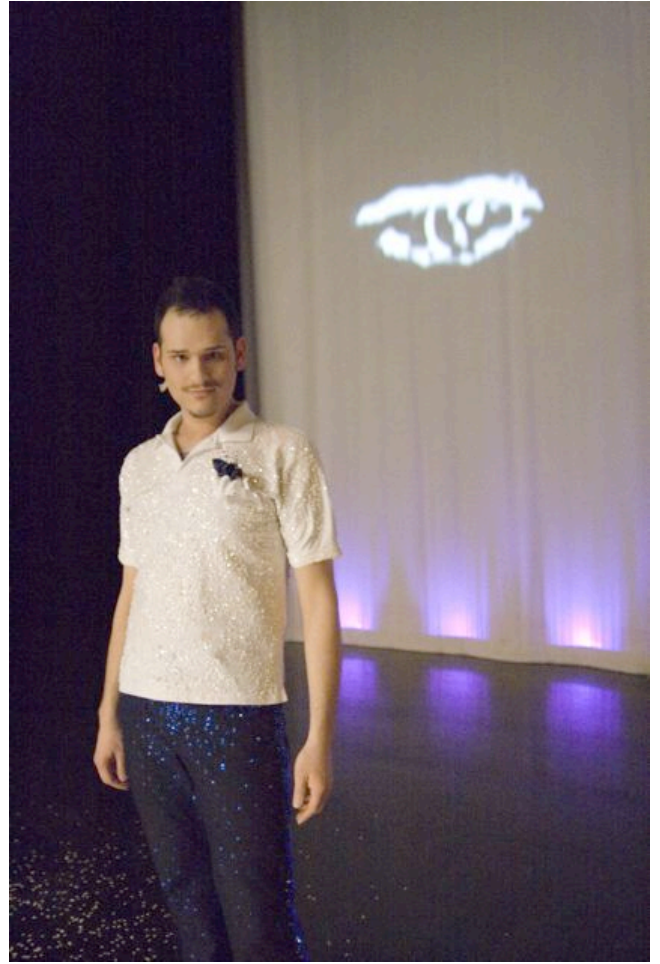
(The music continues as Jim searches for another outfit to wear. He decides on the jeans and t-shirt.)

Sixty seconds to every minute. Sixty minutes to every hour. Twenty four hours to every day. Tickety tick tock the time away.

(Music ends. Jim approaches the imaginary mirror to give himself a pep talk.) The big day is here. Finally time to get my results. If you're going to be told that you are HIV positive, you're going to look gorgeous. You're going to dress up and look your motherfucking best. It's totally the Sarah Michelle Gellar effect: like when she's fighting all those vampires in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and she is just covered in blood but her makeup is perfect. Girl, if you're getting voted off this island, you are going to look fan-fucking-tastic! *This is not it!*

(Jim returns to the rack optimistically to search for the perfect outfit. Faintly, instrumental music from "The Little Mermaid" plays in the background. Jim turns around, excited, curious, to see a brilliant white shirt covered in sequins and sequined navy blue pants descending from the heavens. He rushes to put the pants on. He takes the shirt from the hanger, pulls it over his head, and sequins explode and rain down from the shirt. It is too fabulous to believe! Instead of deus ex machina, it's deus ex sequina!)





Epilogue

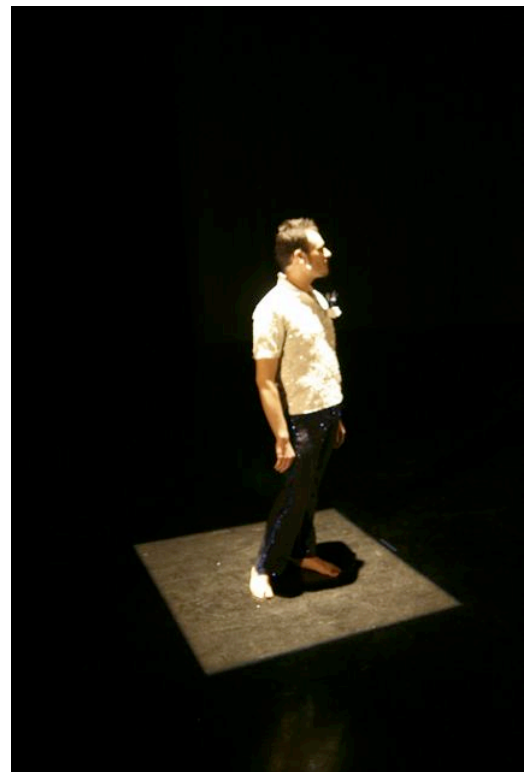
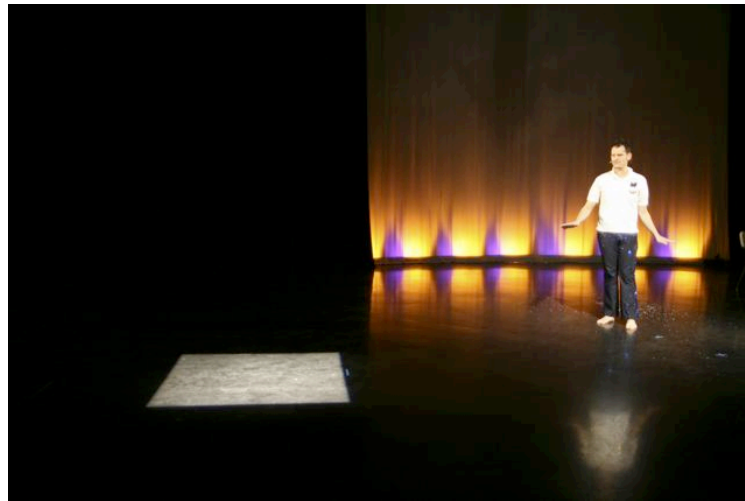
I want you to know that I can still be seduced. I want you to know that even with all my liberal, progressive, secular education, I can still be seduced by the scent of incense, the dab of holy water, by the gold trimmed vestments and the solid gold chalice. I can still be seduced by the ecstatic feeling of singing hymns at the top of my lungs along with a few hundred other people, the organ booming along with us. I can still be seduced by the comfort of knowing exactly what comes next: first reading, responsorial psalm, second reading, gospel, homily. I can still be seduced by the Catholic mass' three act theatrical flair: the exposition of the readings, the climax of the eucharist, the resolution of the closing hymn. I can still be seduced because I still love the Church. Because I love the way the Church made me feel. The way it wrapped itself around me, and seeped into every one of my pores. The way it insisted that I had a purpose.

I still go to Church from time to time. Mostly holidays. Almost always when my mother asks me to go with her. Sometimes I go to Mass because there's something about the ritual that still makes me feel balanced and peaceful and normal.

(The square of white light illuminates. Jim looks at it but doesn't go in.) In the church's private

little room, there is this *expectation* that I'll do bad things. It's kind of a failsafe that way. I will do bad things, and I will be absolved, every time I come back to this private little room. I have a whole life of doing bad things in front of me. Permission granted. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. Yes. I can choose.

(The lighted pathway illuminates leading to the square of light.) And sometimes I go because I like the tease of seduction, I like to flirt with the Church, take the Church out dancing from time to time, invite him into my little private room or make my way over to his. *(Jim walks down the pathway into the square of light.)* We could both have our way with each other, if we wanted. But right now, I'm too nervous to take any chances. So I just watch. *(Lights fade slowly. The square of light is the last light to fade away.)*



Appendix B*Preview Article from "Between The Lines"**March 15, 2007*

Between THE LinesTM

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'Listen' to Leija

U-M student's solo production to bring gay sex back

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Jim Leija is stumped. He begins busting out Beyonce's "Listen," explaining it served as a distraction during rehearsals for his solo musical-esque production. But after botching a few lines, he dives into the middle of the chorus: "The melody I start ... " And then he stops.

"We don't really know the words," Leija says, erupting into laughter with his director Erin Markey. Ironically, the next half is, "... but can't complete."

It doesn't matter, though. Leija, 27, won't be belting Beyonce during his comical and campy show "Sins, with all my Heart." The University of Michigan graduate student, who's performing the engagement as his thesis at 8 p.m. March 16-17 on U-M's campus, went shopping with Markey for a mess of navy blue pants.

For 10 hours he and his Grace-like counterpart – who later exaggerates their shopping spree by four hours – hit up Kmart, Meijer, Salvation Army, Value World, and just about anywhere else that sells schoolboy-looking trousers.

When they began rehearsing later that day, they planned to practice extensively and write the show's end. They didn't.

"We just Google searched song lyrics for Beyonce's 'Listen,'" Markey laughs.

Throwing his arms up and belting again, Leija quips: "There's some inspiration in there."

Leija may have fumbled the lyrics to a "Dreamgirls" tune, but his one-man show does have something in common with the '60s-set musical. It's all the sequins, a whopping 70,000-plus that Leija and Markey purchased from Lynch's in Livonia right before their interview.

"Since this costume design has developed, it's becoming like a really big part of what the show's about. And that's not something that could've been written in," Markey notes before continuing and laughing: "It was all about the kinds of navy blue pants that we could

find at the thrift store that looked really bad on Jim."

Leija adds, "There were lots of them!"

The pants, along with the white collared shirts, are a play on the Catholic schoolboy look; one that Leija knows all too well. He laughs, "I had not put that uniform on in so long. It was a really surprising moment – and scary."

The musical begins intimately in Leija's childhood bedroom and progresses through the space of his private Catholic school and then into gay clubs, bathhouses and back into a confined space: an HIV testing room.

Sounds sloppy? It is.

"This story isn't interesting unless there's something," Markey stalls and then continues, "there's some conflict, there's something messy. I mean we live in the world of 'Fear Factor,' where people eat bugs. You really have to have a messy show."

"We've got it!" Leija snaps.

Bringing sex to the forefront, "Sins, with all my Heart" blends sexual identity with being gay in the context of AIDS, marriage and political agendas. It highlights the post-AIDS crisis era,

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► Leija

Continued from page 17

when most 20-somethings weren't even sexually active. And it does all of that with Leija in his schoolboy costume.

"I'm not putting out the most flattering version of myself," he admits. "But I think it's important for us as queer people to see depictions of other queer people with the good and the bad."

Leija wrote a slew of drafts, but when Markey stepped in the two re-worked a good portion of the script. With the basic story mapped

"I'm not putting out the most flattering version of myself. But I think it's important for us as queer people to see depictions of other queer people with the good and the bad."

- Jim Leija

"Sins, with all my Heart"

By Jim Leija and Erin Markey

8 p.m. March 16-17

The Video Studio

University of Michigan Duderstadt Center (North Campus)

Free

www.jimleija.com

out pre-production, they tightened the show's opening and ending. "Something that works on the page doesn't necessarily work on the stage," Leija says.

Markey playfully dodges the question about working with Leija noting, "Jim and I have worked on several things together." They met during a U-M project while the always-on-the-move Markey (who currently resides in New York) and Leija were taking a break. Markey, who has a soft spot for new kids, sauntered over to Leija. "I was like, 'Hey, do you wanna do handstands?'"