

INTERVIEW

When founder and executive editor Sean O'Brien Strub first offered David Drake a place atop the masthead of *POZ*, the first national glossy magazine for people affected by HIV and AIDS, the actor-playwright graciously declined. The time was late 1993, and Drake was still luxuriating in the tremendous success of his Strub-produced, Obie Award-winning one-man show *The Night Larry*

Media

Kramer Kissed Me, which opened off Broadway at the Perry Street Theatre in June 1992. Having recently moved to Los Angeles, where the piece was mounted at West Hollywood's Tiffany Theatre for three months during the summer of 1993, Drake was actively pursuing a film and television acting career. Simultaneously, offers were pouring in for him to perform *Night* overseas and Down Under. There were even plans for a screen version of the play.

"I didn't want to start up a magazine then," says Drake of his decision not to accept Strub's invitation. "I really wanted to get into films. I thought I was going to make a movie of *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*. That was my form of activism. That was my message. There were things I wanted to do with that in terms of the epidemic and what I wanted to say about it at the time. I didn't need another vehicle."

Much has happened since.

First and foremost, *POZ* is an undeniable success. Named "Hottest Magazine of 1995" by *Rolling Stone*, it was deemed best service book at the *Utne Reader's* Alternative Press Awards that same year. The magazine, which recently went from bimonthly to monthly publication, celebrated its second anniversary in June. With circulation at 100,000, it continues to expand its coverage of the epidemic to the satisfaction and benefit of an ever-widening readership.

As for Drake, while *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* never made it to celluloid, its star and author did perform the piece in London, Edinburgh, Melbourne and Sydney. Upon his return stateside, however, Drake—who moved back to New York City in the spring of 1995—found no inspiration in theater and film, neither behind the scenes nor in front of the cameras.

"I had done everything I wanted to do with *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*," he says. "I couldn't find any work in the theater that meant anything. Nothing meant anything. And that's how I work. I'll do it if it means something to me."

What Drake did find significance in was the writing assignments he accepted from national periodicals such as *The Advocate*, *Details*—and *POZ*.

"I was writing magazine articles like crazy and loving it," he says. "It was hard, it was new. I felt like I was speaking on my own terms again."

Not surprisingly, in November 1995, when Strub once again urged his friend to helm *POZ*, Drake acquiesced.

"I said to myself, 'You'll never know if you don't try it,'" says Drake, who began logging long hours at the magazine's Manhattan headquarters shortly after Thanksgiving.

In May, Drake took an extended hiatus from his *POZ* editor-in-chief duties to fulfill a long-standing prior commitment to star as Michael in the off-Broadway revival of Mart Crowley's classic 1968 gay comedy-drama *The Boys in the Band* at the WPA Theatre. Despite his involvement in the production, which runs through the first week in August at the WPA and may be transferred to a larger off-Broadway house thereafter, Drake maintains he is not actively seeking film, television or theater work.

"I told my agents, 'Don't send me out on anything, because I'm not going out,'" he says.

HEALTH, HOPE AND HIV

Actor-playwright David Drake assumes a new role as editor-in-chief of *POZ* magazine

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Less than a week after the play opened, Drake had returned to *POZ* during the day and was treading the boards at night. "If the show goes, I'll go with it, and I'll work out a way of dealing with both that doesn't kill me. If not, then I'm just back at *POZ*, and I won't have to work two jobs. It's not like the show's going to end and I'm going to start sitting around saying, 'Oh, God, can't I get a pilot?' That's not in the game plan at all."

Below, Drake discusses his *POZ* strategy and shares his vision of HIV and AIDS at the turn of the century.

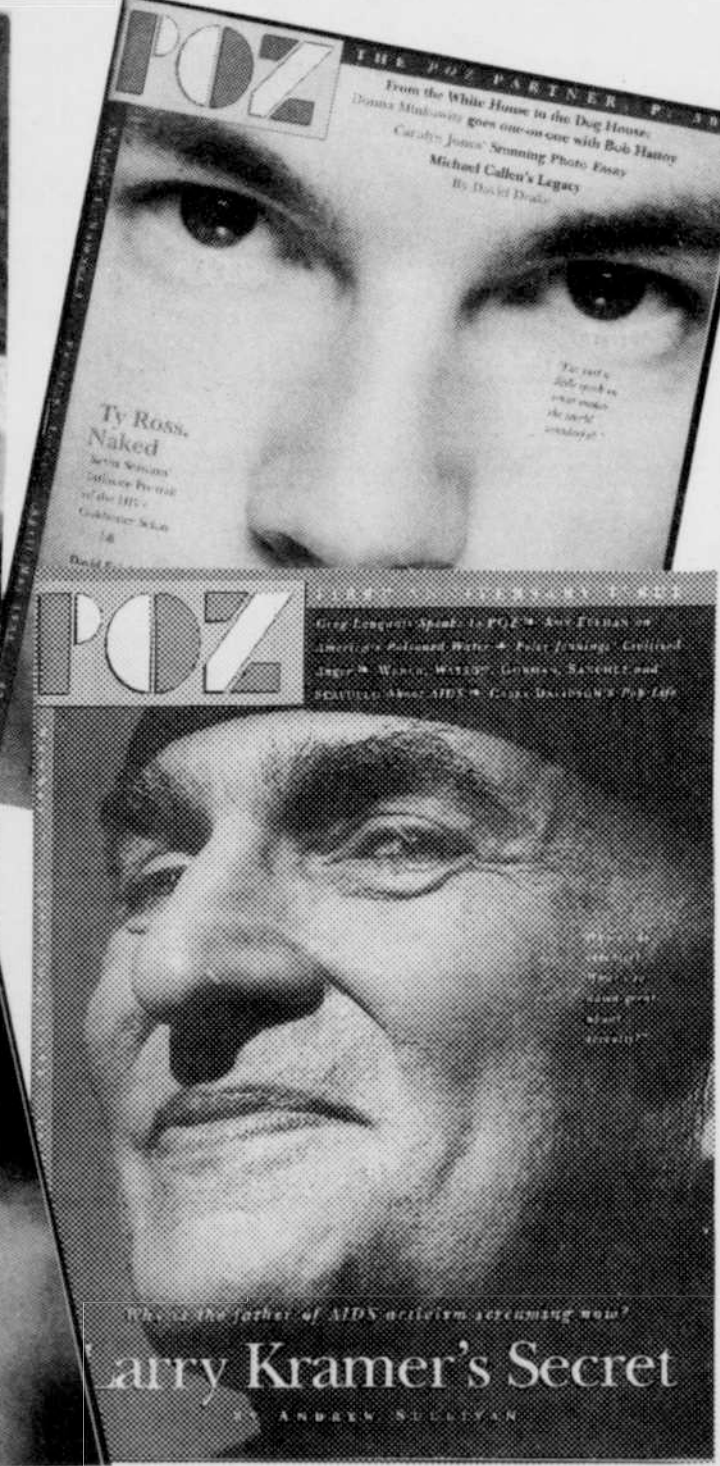
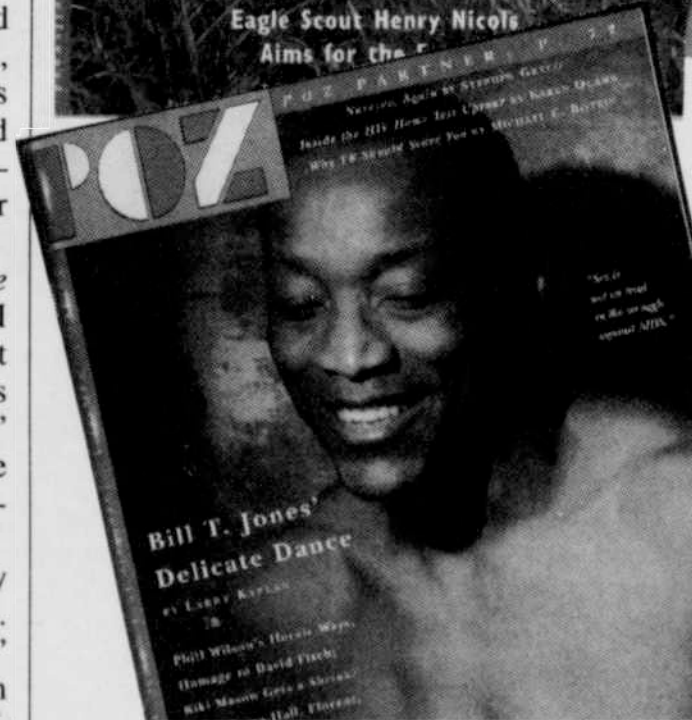
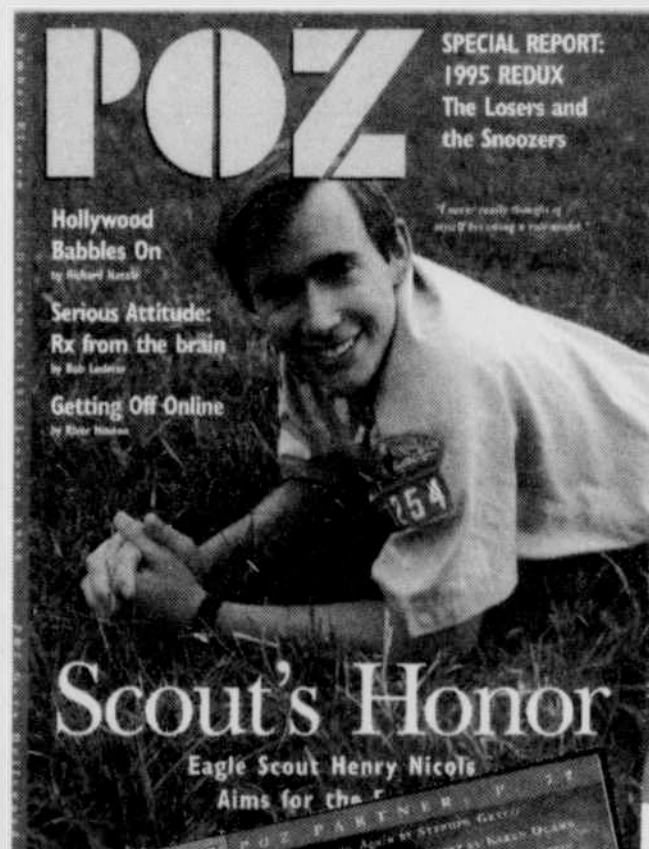
Vaillancourt: As David Drake—and as an HIV-negative, white gay male—what do you bring to *POZ*?

Drake: As David Drake, I bring showbiz to the

community in America. There are so many groups. There are so many people doing stuff. And there's still a lot of interest there. But I didn't feel like it was being reported accurately anywhere. The media at large weren't reflecting the vastness of the HIV and AIDS community.

In answer to the question about being HIV-negative, I am, but my life still has so much AIDS in it because of the people I've loved and continue to love, and the way it's educated me as a person, my own personal evolution. The epidemic is a vehicle to learn about so many other things and people that I wouldn't have ever expected to learn about in my life.

In your opinion, how has the face of AIDS changed since the onset of the epidemic?



magazine. [Laughs] Now that sounds so crass, but I want to make a stylish magazine. I want people to read it. I've been pushing very hard to make it more readable. I was polling people individually, and they weren't really reading it. They were making criticisms of the magazine. I said, 'You're not reading it. It's there.' OK, so that means I've got to come in and spice it up, whether that's in the editorial slant, in the photography. More photographs. That doesn't mean less text. That just means more pages. Without a good photograph, people aren't necessarily going to read [the article]. The style of a piece. The title of a piece. What's the cover story? Things like that. It's hard to pinpoint.... The profiles. More people. Shorter pieces in some cases, but I wanted to get a bigger community going because I thought there was still a lot of energy left in the AIDS and HIV

I think it's reflected in the magazine. I'm going to defer to my work. [Laughs] I get so many calls, for instance, about gay things—gay music, gay books—that have nothing to do with HIV or AIDS. [They say] a lot of readers will be interested, and I think, well, yes, I know I have a large gay readership. I also have a lot of straight women who read the magazine, and a lot of caregivers who are trying to learn how to care for their loved ones or who are providing service somewhere. Scientists read the magazine. I get pegged in it being a gay disease....

As San Francisco psychologist Walt Odets pointed out in his 1995 book *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*, we have witnessed the homosexualization of AIDS and the AIDSification of homosexuality.

I'm just trying to open it up so we can talk about it. I've been doing that quite a bit. There are a lot of people of color in the magazine that weren't there earlier. In general, I think it was a very gay white male magazine before I got there. The tone of it. The point of view of it. Now that's how it started, and that's what started people reading it. But it's got to evolve.... I'm pushing the envelope. I put the first black woman [Bronx grass-roots activist Michelle Lopez] on the cover [of the August issue]. I mean, that's kind of ridiculous, in my opinion, after two years.

Anything special in *POZ*'s immediate future?

I've been working hard on the music issue [hitting stands in October]. It's all devoted to HIV and its impact on the music industry. People with HIV in the music industry—singers, composers, all kinds of stuff like that. Rap. There's a big article on rap. That was interesting. I wanted to reach a larger audience of color, too.

***POZ* just turned two. There are so many different women's magazines, a multitude of entertainment magazines. Why do you think there is still only one national glossy geared to the HIV/AIDS communities?**

I don't know. Because we're smarter. Because the energy, the care to get information out there, started from Sean Strub. And it's kept him alive. And he knows that.... A majority of magazines are trying to make silly things serious, you know? [Laughs] Ours is sort of the opposite. We're taking something very serious—lifesaving information; educating people on how to read their blood report; serious, dry, hard subject matters—and making it readable, enjoyable in a certain way, and usable. I can't get over the importance of the practicality of information.

Now, I read a lot of newsletters, too. They usually don't have the budgets that we have. They don't have the advertisers. They don't reach as many people as we can. But there is some good work going on out there in newsletter work, too. Some really vibrant writing and information. And it's like, "Oh, God, if this could get to a larger audience." And sometimes, through us, it can, since we give out the magazine at [AIDS service organizations] and other service outlets.

In your own words, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* ends at "ten minutes to midnight on Millennium's eve, after the war has been won, looking out across a landscape of memories and memorials, filled with faith in a new beginning." Do you still have the same vision of New Year's Eve 1999?

No, I don't have that anymore. [Laughs, pauses] What do I have now? A somewhat more dry and practical vision. Frankly, with combination drug therapy for people living with HIV, I think we're headed in the right direction. And alternative treatments. Again, people really are living longer, but we still don't know much about it. We really don't. We have this one article I'm so proud of [in the August issue]. No one had written it yet—we wrote it. Mike Barr wrote about the way AZT has mutated HIV and created a super HIV. We really are learning how different it is in different people based on their own personal history.... You can't just say, "You get HIV, you die within three years." It's not that way. It's like we're living experiments with this thing. We're all experimenting.... Scientifically, things come up that you're not anticipating. Never lose hope for a cure. I don't think it's ever good to let go of that because I think it might happen still. I don't know. Who does? Who can really say? You just have to have all your options open and keep hoping, which is why we've [subtitled] *POZ* "Health, Hope and HIV." But at the core is coalition politics. I see this as a coalition of people who are reading the magazine and learning about each other. And I enjoy that sharing.