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THEATER

Performing wellness

A collaborative approach makes *Living with HIV* powerful theater

BY GARY MORRIS



Tabor grins and calls it an "internal circus." Michael asks himself, "How do I theatricalize the work?" Kate says, "Get out of your head—stop thinking!"

Tabor is Portland metal artist Tabor Porter, and the "circus" is the process of telling his life story as a long-term AIDS survivor. That story is interpreted and performed by gay actor Michael Teufel as part of *Living with HIV: Performing Wellness III*, sponsored by Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center in cooperation with Project Quest.

Kate Hawkes is director and mentor of the show as well as a kind of mother hen, guiding the pair through a complex process of empathy and self-understanding. She's also working with four other couples for the production.

This event is the third in a series that began two years ago as a collaboration between Hawkes, then director of Artists Repertory Theatre's community outreach program, and Susan Hedlund, an oncology social worker at Oregon Health Sciences University. Inspired in part by Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Wit*, about a professor fighting ovarian cancer, the two created a theatrical form to help terminally ill people express themselves and come to terms with their diseases.

They set up workshops for a small group of matched writers and actors who would spend several months getting to know each other and together create a kind of dual autobiography. The stories are then performed as theatrical vignettes, making up the "Performing Wellness" series.

Hawkes encourages the participants to be as ambitious as possible, incorporating poetry, dance, dialogue, storytelling, jokes—anything to capture a life under duress in less than half an hour.

The success of the first two shows indicated this was a sound approach. Audiences expecting a maudlin sobfest instead found pathos and humor in such stories as "Traveling with Mr. C," which presented cancer as an oily Lothario in a tux who laments the "bad press" he gets and chillingly reminds the woman he's "involved with" that "I'll always love you, no matter how you look."

Another segment, "Picking Up the Pieces," paired a leukemia patient with her "emotional baggage," arrestingly visualized as a



Michael Teufel (left) and Tabor Porter during rehearsal

whining, leechlike creature in a gunny sack, hanging onto its victim.

Hawkes and Hedlund started the Well Arts Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to exploring and publicizing the connection between creativity and good health. The organization bases its work both on sound science that shows the transformative power of art and on their proven ability to create a strong theatrical experience.

Interest in these events has been high. Actors now approach Hawkes, rather than vice versa. The plays are performed in high school and medical school classrooms as well as theaters. The quality of the writing hasn't gone unnoticed, either; two of the pieces were short-listed for the Oregon Book Award.

Hawkes says the series has concrete benefits for both participants and audiences. "Every human being is an artist," she asserts, "and when an individual is given an opportunity to access that...wellness is facilitated—emotional, spiritual and psychological."

A crucial component of this is trust, she notes. Writer and director must go with their instincts and move out of the analytical into the more daunting but, in this case, more rewarding realm of feeling. You must "stop thinking," she contends, "and trust that artist-child inside."

Hawkes endeavors to find actors with both technical skill and a "deep emotional well." To avoid them overtaking the story, she stresses the power and, indeed, sanctity of the words. "Everything you choose to do," she tells the actors, "has to support and not overwhelm the story."

This means no improvisation, although Teufel slyly admits, "If the joke works, you work the joke." A familiar face from Portland plays such as *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, *Things You Shouldn't Say After Midnight* and, most recently, *After the Zipper*, he says one of the attractions of this work is "the universality of the stories. What the writers talk about is literally life and death."

The 30-year-old actor is a veteran of the series, having performed the story of a cancer survivor named Laura in one of the previous shows. (In a startling and apparently quite effective conceit, he played her as a man.)

Inevitably, the participants bond in these circumstances—Laura and Teufel so much so that when she passed away, he read her eulogy. He still gets emotional when he talks about her, perhaps in part because of another personal connection: His mother, too, died of breast cancer at 50.

Teufel says he's well matched personally with Porter, 48. It doesn't hurt that the subject's roller-coaster life, from which he managed to step off before crashing, is an actor's dream.

Growing up in the '60s and '70s, Porter sampled all those decades had to offer.

PHOTOS BY MARY DAVIS