

YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

Resource Room, 701 Mission Street, San Francisco

Thursday, JUNE 23, 2005

6:30 p.m.

Free and Open to the Public

TEST/POSITIVE/NOW

The Infection *Monologues*

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: ERIC ROFES



This **experimental** performance piece breaks new ground on the ways we understand new HIV infections among gay men, risk-taking and unprotected sex, illness-driven shame, and crystal use. **FOR MORE INFORMATION: (415) 255-6210**

A STUDY IS DOCUMENTING THE EXPERIENCES OF GAY MEN WHO TESTED HIV POSITIVE SINCE 2000. **WRITE: gmhs3@AOL.COM**

Test/Positive/Now

An experimental performance piece loosely based on the experiences of gay men who have tested positive for HIV since the year 2000.

Presented June 23, 2005

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

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This is the revised script for a experimental performance piece based on the experiences of gay men who have tested positive for HIV since 2000. It is intended as a pilot that will be developed, broadened in scope, and expanded in length over the next year.

The script focuses on a series of monologues by HIV-positive characters. These characters are composites of men I have surveyed and/or interviewed. While many of the details and some of the quotations are taken from the men in my study, the characters are not representative of individual men.

In this initial one-night production, we aim to pilot various parts of what we hope to build into a larger production over the next years: the initial script, scenic design, sound and video. Hence we see the June 23rd production as an initial check-in point for the entire concept of building a piece around the real-life stories of men who have newly tested positive.

Test/Positive/Now

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Begin with actors' chant:

Jack	Victor	Bo
Eat	Fuck	Skydive
Feel	Leap	Penetrate
Swallow	Heat	Bleed
Scream	Cut	Seed
Test	Positive	Now

Bo:

I remember the phone call as if it were yesterday. Actually, it was March 30, 2003 at around 11 in the morning. It was a phone call that changed my life.

I was sitting at my desk at the office, working away. When the secretary buzzed and let me know that my doctor was on the phone, I kind of guessed that something was up. Little did I know.

As soon as she put him through, the gravity of the situation became obvious. Dr. Mackinaw's voice was deep and serious. He told me my blood tests had just come back from the labs and that there was an unexpected finding.

I think my world already started to collapse, even before he gave me the specifics. As soon as he said “unexpected finding,” the walls of my world started to cave in. It was like watching a movie in slow motion. You kind of know what’s going on but also kind of don’t take it all in. I clearly entered some sort of altered state. Crawling through a dark tunnel getting more and more narrow.

So there I was sitting at my desk in my business suit, when the doctor tells me I’ve tested positive for HIV. I didn’t think they told you this over the phone but, sure enough, here he was giving me the results.

At first, it was like being punched in the stomach. All the wind was knocked out of me. And the tunnel grew narrower and darker...And then something strange happened.

I knew the doctor kept talking and telling me things, but my mind simply froze, kind of numbed out.

And then, the strangest thing happened. I found myself thinking of just one thing: what would I eat for dinner that night?

Jack:

I was in the doctor’s office. He’d called me in and that wasn’t a good sign. I’d come in for my annual physical and had all the usual tests. But I really wasn’t expecting to hear this kind of news. I expected to hear about blood pressure, or cholesterol, or, at worse, some hint of skin cancer. I’m over 45 years old. Something’s bound to come up sooner or later.

When my doctor came into the room, I could tell something was up. The energy grew creepy, ominous. It was as if the music changed in an Alfred Hitchcock movie. Something bad was going to happen.

He told me “You’ve tested positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.”

My only reaction was, “There must be some mistake. I’m HIV negative.”

There must be some mistake. I’m HIV negative. Some mistake. HIV negative.

He kept talking. Something about more tests. Something about the prognosis being good. Something about being lucky it was 2004.

I went into a trance. A deep trance. I didn’t hear a thing.

Honestly, I’m not sure I’ve ever come out of it. And it’s almost two years later.

Victor:

I knew I had HIV even before I tested positive. I had taken enough risks to know that eventually it might catch up with me. When I got this really bad flu part of me suspected that I had gotten myself infected. It had finally happened. So I went to a local clinic for an HIV test and remember having my blood drawn and thinking “Victor, you may not want to come back and hear the bad news” but I did come back.

I remember sitting there waiting and looking at the male nurse who was going to present me with my results. He was hot. Very Italian looking with wavy black hair and a roman nose., Chest hair peaking out of the v-collar of his scrubs and bulging biceps. I wondered just how inappropriate it would be to make a date with a nurse I met at an aids clinic. Then my mind began to wander and I thought about what it would mean when the results came back positive. I had thought about it dozens of times, what my life would be like when I became infected.

I had it all figured out. I would be the picture of healthy living with HIV. I would go jogging in golden gate park, I would take up yoga and acupuncture and I would spend time in Chinatown shopping for herbs and roots. Roots are very salubrious. It would be like having my own sitcom, “Me and HIV”. A show about me and my kooky new partner HIV and all our wacky adventures. The opening montage would consist of clips of me taking my meds, cheerfully walking the streets of San Francisco, getting encouragement from my doctor, standing on the beach contemplating life’s great mysteries and then at the end my friends and I and HIV, of course, would all pile into one of those old Cadillac convertibles. Those really long ones. And we would try to drive down Lombard Street. Oh HIV, you so crazy!

Then the hunky nurse approached with my results. He sat down and said “Victor, you tested positive for HIV”

I took a deep breath and it hit me. I wasn’t exactly relieved but it was as if a cloud had lifted that had been over me as long as I had known what HIV was. I don’t remember much. It’s all sort of a blur. The hunky nurse gave me a smile as if to say “you’re going to be alright”. He asked if I wanted a hug and I politely declined.

Instantly all my thoughts, all my expectations were gone. No walks on the beach, no trips to Chinatown. No wacky adventures. It had been mere moments and I already knew that life with HIV was nothing at all like I had envisioned. My life as an HIV negative man had ended. I left there for some comfort food, Cheeseburger and fries. Funny how food that is bad for us is so very comforting.

Bo:

You have in front of you three men, three gay men. Some might see us as victims, others as demons, yet others as badboys, irresponsible renegades, the fools who got infected. This room is filled tonight with the energy of hundreds of men who have tested positive since the year 2000,

and with images, sounds, articles, graphics, videos, capturing themes from these men's lives: themes of safety and danger, risk taking, substance use, transgression, shame, and guilt.

Jack:

All three of us have tested positive for HIV. All three of us did something to welcome HIV into our bloodstreams. All three of us carry responsibility for testing positive, not in 1985 or 1993... but recently, each of us over the past three years.

Victor:

What does it mean to test positive for HIV in 2005? Is it different than 20 years ago? Are issues of guilt, shame and culpability different? Is the prognosis different? Does it mean something different to test positive for HIV today than it did in 1985?

Jack:

Things don't always happen like you expect them to.

I didn't go for the blood test expecting to test positive. Why should I? I don't have sex that much these days. Almost all of the sex I've had in the past few years has been what people classify as "safe sex."

Certainly most of it was cocksucking. I love sucking dick and most of what I've heard and read over the past twenty years led me to believe that oral sex is pretty safe, even if guys come in your mouth.

Once I'd realized that anal sex presented the greatest risk, I focused my activities on cocksucking. That was more than 20 years ago.

And I became a good cocksucker. In fact, I became a great cocksucker. As I spent less and less time with my legs over my shoulders and more and more time on my knees, I became damn good at what I was doing. In fact, sometimes I think I spent as much time perfecting my cocksucking skills as I spent getting my college degree.

I bet some university offers a Ph.D. in cocksucking. Doctor of Philosophy in Fellatio?

I am 45 years old. I was proud that I'd lived through the golden age of the seventies, then the war years of the 1980s, survived those darkest days of AIDS, and still had myself a good time. When AIDS hit I remember a friend telling me that he didn't join the homosexual club and suffer all the drama from his family to take the "sexual" out of "homosexual." What good was being a fag if you couldn't enjoy your sex life?

Why am I telling you all this? It's as if I have to justify my life and myself, now that I've tested positive. Even though I did nothing wrong, why do I feel ashamed to tell people I tested positive last year?

Have you noticed the circles that have formed these days, little circles that show the "good" infected people and the "bad" infected people. Those circles of people who say things like, "I've been infected for 20 years...bla bla bla," or "I tested positive in 1986, as soon as the test became available."

Sure, I admire people who have managed to survive all these years HIV positive, before the drugs that we have today. At the same time, it sometimes feels as if they're trying to let the world know that they got infected before we even knew about AIDS. As if somehow this makes them honorable, righteous, socially acceptable.

It reminds me of back in the 1980s, when children and women were seen as the "innocent" victims of AIDS and gay men were seen as the "guilty" ones. How we fought back then to eliminate that entire game. We insisted that all people with AIDS were innocent, all deserved our support, and that whether you caught HIV from sex or needles or your mother, you were all the same.

That's all changed today. Those of us who test positive today, are somehow dishonorable, bad, socially unacceptable. We're the ones who should have known better. Should have kept our legs closed. Should have said, "no thank you" to sex..."I'd rather spend my time crocheting"

Isn't it strange that I should feel this way, because, if what my doctor tells me is right, I truly should feel like one of the innocent people with HIV.

You see, when the tests came back and I got the call to come in to talk with my doctor, I never imagined it was about HIV. I thought, oops, must be that bad cholesterol showing up in my blood again. The tests must expose all the junk food I've eaten for the past decade. All those Big Macs. All those French fries. All those supersize me meals. That's where my guilt was focused.

I didn't think I'd been caught with my pants down. I thought I'd been caught with my hand in the potato chip bag.

Oh no. Not that!

But when the doctor set me down, I could tell from the expression on his face that this was not good news. But I was not at all prepared for news as bad as this.

He broke it to me gently, but the message was clear. I tested positive for HIV. As that news sunk in, he kept talking, but I didn't hear anything at all. It was like the sound was turned off on the television. I saw his mouth moving, I knew he was telling me something, but I heard nothing at all. I was in my head thinking, "But I am HIV negative."

When I finally surfaced, he was explaining that he recommended that I get on all these drugs. He was talking specific names and specific doses, but I wasn't ready to hear it. Not at all. I still couldn't believe that I tested HIV positive. Something must be wrong.

I tried to remember when my last test was. I thought it had been just a year ago, but it turns out it was three years ago. Still, I haven't had much sex since then. Maybe got fucked a half-dozen times. I can only think of one time during that period when we didn't use a condom but that was with my friend Otis and he is negative to this day.

I couldn't imagine how I became infected with HIV.

When I asked the doctor about this, he looked over my chart, and told me that he thinks my case might be unusual. I didn't know what he meant.

That's when he told me that I didn't just test positive, but that my immune system was shot. Already. I wasn't the typical person testing positive--I had already lost my immune system. How could this be?

That's why he wants me on all the medications right now. He told me that not only did I test positive but I was almost down to the point where they could classify me as someone who has AIDS. He said he'd seen similar blood tests but only in people who have had HIV for a decade or more.

How could this be?

Then somehow my thinking shifted. I remembered back a long time ago. A very long time ago. Back to 1980 when I lived in New York City, before I moved up to Maine. Back in 1980 I had swollen lymph nodes. Not just a little, but a lot swollen. Huge. In my neck and armpits. In fact, I had to have an operation to cut them open and drain them. See the scars that are still here on my neck?

That operation occurred right around the time doctors started seeing gay men dying in New York City. Around the time we first started realizing something was going on. Around the time the earth stood still and we all realized that life would change forever.

At the time, the doctors suspected something was up with me. But all I had was swollen lymph nodes, nothing else was wrong. And when testing started, I held my breath. I thought I'd find out I was positive from the start. But no, my tests always came back negative.

So I spent most of the past 20 years in this odd state of limbo. I always told people I tested negative, but I also always wondered. I was relatively healthy, and I always did AIDS volunteer work, but I always wondered: had they missed something? Was that lymph node problem in 1980 linked somehow to HIV?

Victor:

I like to tell people the Internet got me infected. That isn't the full story of course. But it sounds good. My computer gave some nasty virus and passed it along to me and my household appliances. People are always expecting you to blame it on something.

It all started out in my late 20's. I had always had a healthy sex life but I never felt like I was fully exploring sex and pleasure. The problem was I had been a chubby gay boy that had become a chubby gay man.

I'd always manipulated my profile on Manhunt to catch whatever fish I wanted. I work in marketing and P.R. If I couldn't sell myself to horny gay men I'd be out of a job. I'd cut a couple of inches off my height or move from moderately hairy to hairy depending on what was called for. If a hot guy was into Latinos I quickly edited my profile to make my Mexican blood more prominent. I could be top, bottom, vers depending on whatever the man I wanted had in his profile. I became quickly skilled at recasting my profile in 15 seconds.

But I couldn't easily get away with changing my body type. I had one of those pictures with me at a safe distance in a black slimming shirt but was stumped at the section where they ask you to select a body type. They don't have a "needs to drop a few pounds" category so I was stuck with average. I had never been average at anything in my life and now online where body type is most important, I had been reduced to average. In person it had always been different. I felt like whatever I lacked in appearance I could make up for in personality. But online we are not hooking up with personalities. And average guys attract other average guys. If I wanted to put "muscular" in my profile I would have to put my gym membership to good use, work out hard instead of sitting at home eating Haagen Daz while watching sex in the city.

Long story short, it took a year but I finally morphed from a chubby gay boy into a muscle boy with big pecs and arms. I still remember the day I changed my profile and said goodbye to Mr. Average and hello to Mr. Muscle. And the boys said hello back.

I found myself sexing in whole new circles. I was playing in the big leagues now with built men, hard cocks and fucking for hours. I was going to sex parties and even throwing my own sex parties. Thanks to my body I felt I had finally arrived sexually. In one short year I went from being Natalie Green to Blair Warner

I know what you're thinking. How sad. His bad self-image, his lack of self-esteem, this awful gay culture made him hate his body, turned him into a whore. Got him infected with HIV. All because of low self-esteem

Let me stop you right there. No one has ever accused me of having low self-esteem. Maybe too much but never too little. Sure I have body image issues. Who doesn't? But I took control. I valued myself enough to know I could do anything I set my mind to including transform my physical appearance. Even when I felt like my body wasn't at its best I always knew I could compete with my humor and intelligence and charm and modesty.

I have always enjoyed being an urban gay man and I have always been enchanted with gay men. I remember when I moved to the city in the early 90s how cheerful and excited I was. But the city wasn't. There was a palpable pall over the city. I felt like I was Mary Tyler Moore walking into an episode of Band of Brothers.

After my body changed I felt like I was ready both physically and mentally to finally fully explore my sexuality. I was going to climb my sexual Mt Everest. Not because it was there but because I was there and I was young and alive. I remember my first "White Party" years ago. I took my shirt off and people were looking at me. Not to tell me to put it back on, as I had often feared but with hunger and lust. Life was about music and sex and men and partying. I would do X or G and dance all night and then go home with some hot guys I met. Sometimes I would do crystal and G and go to some wild sex parties. I had reached the zenith in my sexual exploration and at the same time felt it possible to reclaim, in some way, a time before the epidemic when men could relate to each other with out the barrier of disease.

This is where I'm supposed to express my regrets about it all. Don't you think it's about that time?

Well that's not going to happen. I don't regret the life I lived. For five years I saw a whole new world, a world of freedom and pleasure. I loved and celebrated myself. Sure there were times when I was high and took risks but I didn't take the risks because I was high. Being high simply made it easier for me to behave the way I really wanted to.

When that hunky nurse told me I had tested positive, part of me was shocked but a larger part of me was like, "Hello! I've been fucked hundreds of times by hundreds of men and didn't always use condoms. I didn't deliberately attempt to get HIV and I wasn't careless or ignorant. I took an informed risk, like lots of guys do. Just like if had been climbing the real Mt Everest. Now at the peak I had a moment of peace

I know I'm not supposed to say it, but testing positive is not the end of the world. It felt like it at first but it's not. Now my sex can just be my sex. All the messages and precautions and warnings are shut off. All the judgments and guilt-trips and fear around two men having sex have vanished. And what's left is pleasure. Pure, simple pleasure.

Bo:

I am a member of the generation that was never supposed to get infected. We were supposed to know better; we were supposed to be educated; we were supposed to commit ourselves to a lifetime of condoms and to never knowing the feeling of having someone come inside you.

I knew better. I should have never gotten infected with HIV, because I knew what to do. I can't claim to be uninformed. I can't claim to be dumb, drunk, or depressed.

What people don't understand is that it isn't entirely about knowledge. When you are young and restless and live in a city like San Francisco, you're playing in a pool where 20, 30, maybe 40% of the hot men you see on-line or at the clubs are infected. It becomes like a crapshoot. It's like you're playing dodgeball. You can behave yourself 90% of the time, and still you finally get hit with the ball.

I'm 27 fucking years old. I've been positive for two years. How the fuck did this happen?

I ask myself this question ten times a day. Every day.

Most of the time, I do the fucking. I might be young and I might have that good boy look about me, but I've always found myself taking charge in the bedroom. And I mean that in a kinky kind of way.

Sure I can be versatile--I can get fucked and I fuck--but most of my sex since I came to San Francisco has involved being the dominant one, the top.

And I go with men of all ages, but I especially enjoy older men, taking charge of these 45 year old daddies. Sort of like the boy fucks his dad. I really like that idea.

Don't look so surprised. In lots of these younger boy / older dad relationships, the boy is on top. Lots of the big tough leather daddies walking around South of Market are looking for a punk kid to put them in their place.

And I've always been all too willing to do so.

I use condoms. They're not my favorite thing but, especially since I mess around with men of all ages, I thought it wise to do the safe sex thing. I didn't really worry that much when I was fucking around with someone my own age. But the older guys, they seemed to be more of a risk.

If I had to be honest, I'd say that I used condoms with 50% of the fucks I threw, and with about 80% of the fucks thrown my way. That's not so bad. Occasionally, when I knew someone was negative, it didn't seem like that big a deal. I remember one time, at a sex party in Berkeley, this kid with a Mohawk was fucking me and the condom sort of didn't work. After a few attempts to get it back on, we tossed it aside, and he gave me a great fuck.

Is that when I became infected?

Or was it with Tony? The first man I can honestly say I ever loved. Forty-eight years old, computer programmer, living with his lover of twenty years in the suburbs, along with their two kids.

I used to think you could choose who you fell in love with. I was hard-ass about romance. I was looking for good times and fun people and parties and action. Love wasn't on the agenda. Maybe it would be when I was in my mid-thirties, but not now. I had more important things to do.

But Tony changed that story. From the moment I met him, I wanted him big time. Fuck that had a lover and kids. Fuck that he was twice my age. Fuck that he was HIV positive. I had no control over any of that. I wanted Tony, in whatever way I could get him.

One of the things I liked from the start was that he was one of those daddies who didn't have problems with sexual versatility. So many of the men I go with are stuck in those 1970s roles: 100% top or 100% bottom. It sometimes feels as if their ego is wrapped up in their percentages. And even fewer of these men can flip-flop in a single evening. I remember one guy jumped out of bed when I started playing with his butt after he'd finished fucking me. Like I had crossed a line you were never supposed to cross.

I went with Tony for almost two years. Sure we had to do it on the sly. But he opened up whole new worlds to me. And he opened me up emotionally to men, in a way I had never opened up before.

Tony did not like condoms, but he did his best to use them. I should say WE did our best to use them. On the one hand, he really didn't want to infect anyone, especially me. The first time I tried to swallow his sperm, he got furious with me. He didn't want to put me at risk in any way.

But over time, things changed. Our sex got hotter over time and when we were in bed, it sometimes felt as if we were in another world. I know it sounds stupid, but I wanted my sperm up his butt. I wanted him to come inside me. I wanted to be that close, every time.

It was like living in a permanent schizoid state: we knew we should use condoms but then things would get going and something would happen, and all of a sudden he'd be fucking me hard and deep and long without a condom. And I'd be right with him, we'd become one, and that fuck would seem to last for hours and hours.

Is that how I became infected?

Everything fell apart when I told him I'd tested positive. He was very loving and supportive, of course, but some sort of wall came down between us. For a few weeks we both pretended nothing had changed, but, on some level, everything changed. You'd think our sex could be freer then, but it became a place of confusion and conflict for both of us. Tony began to have problems getting hard. This only made things more difficult for both of us.

I never understood whether it was his guilt or my anger. I tried to tell him that other men might have infected me, but Tony wouldn't buy that. One time, he told me how ashamed he felt about pozzing me, that he was the older one. That he should have made sure nothing happened.

Within a few months, the entire affair with Tony was over. And what was I left with? A lot of confusion, my first broken heart...and Tony's HIV inside of me...

(Pause)

I'm not a victim. I'm not ashamed.

I'm angry.

Angry at losing the crapshoot. Angry at people who look at me different. Angry at the simple, stupid ways people understand getting infected today.

Victor:

Testing positive today, in 2005. How can this happen? Why does this occur? Don't we look like smart people? Don't we look like we should know better? Don't we look like precisely the kinds of men who would not be testing positive today?

Bo:

How to explain it? How to understand? Speak, gentleman! Speak diseased pariahs! Speak bad boys and renegades! What do people think when you tell them? When they give you that soft, liberal look of support, what's really going through their mind? How do people understand getting infected with HIV in 2005?

Jack: Low self-esteem

Victor: Crystal

Bo: A bad decision

Jack: Internalized homophobia and racism

Victor: Selfishness, nihilism

Bo: Circuit parties

Jack: Sex addiction

Victor: A death wish

Bo: Cyberspace

Jack: Bug chasing, AIDS envy

Victor: Stupidity, irresponsibility

Bo:

Hold on!

How the hell did explaining new infections become the focus of HIV and gay men today? When I first tested poz, I spent so much time deep in my head, wondering how this could have happened to me. Who did this to me? Why did I do what I did? What caused me to ever have sex without a condom? How could I let someone I knew was HIV positive penetrate me without protection?

Very few of my friends asked the question of how it happened, but I wondered how many of them were thinking it. How could a twenty-something kid with a good job and a college education allow himself to get HIV?

Then a few months later, a different thought came over me: How could intelligent people who know that staying fit and exercising reduces risk for heart disease, strokes, and diabetes, allow themselves to eat fast foods or fried foods or never exercise at all after the age of 35?

Why do we hold people with HIV today responsible for their disease, while we don't treat people with heart disease, lung cancer, or diabetes the same way?

Famous American newscaster diagnosed with lung cancer. Smoked almost his entire adult life. The nation embraces him. Stands with him and his family. Hopes for a strong recovery. No talk of guilt. No talk of culpability. No talk of shame. No talk of irresponsibility.

My aunt has spent her entire adult life obese and eating everything in sight. Love her. Enjoy her. Celebrate her. Heart attack at 53. The family embraces her. Hopes for a strong recovery. No talk of guilt. No talk of culpability. No serious talk of losing weight. No talk at all about exercising.

A college friend skis down an advance slope in Aspen, crashes into a tree. Dead on arrival at the hospital. Does anyone blame him for skiing? Does anyone declare skiing off limits? Does anyone condemn the hundreds of people each year who get permanently injured or killed on the ski slopes? Are they blamed for their accidents?

What is it about testing positive for HIV that ignites questions of responsibility and irresponsibility, guilt and shame, culpability. Is it the sex? Is it the gay male sex? Is it the buttfucking?

Jack:

Well maybe I feel a little different about this whole thing. I think we all have to take responsibility for the choices we make. I take responsibility for the times I didn't use a condom. It was my choice. And whether I've been infected for 25 years or whether I caught some superbug and was infected more recently, no one did this to me. I did this to myself. When people ask me about how I got HIV, I tell them I'm not sure, but I take responsibility for everything I've done that put me at risk.

Bo:

I take responsibility too, but do I also have to take on a burden of guilt that people with other life-threatening conditions don't take on?

I want this to be a world where people stop expecting every gay man to remain HIV negative for his entire life. Where people stop being shocked that anyone tests positive today. Where people stop saying things like, "We could stop HIV infections today if everyone would simply follow safe sex rules all the time."

Beautiful sentiments. Save it for a Hallmark card.

What world do those people live in?

I know what world they live in. They live in the egghead world where everything is rational, everything is a decision, everything can be controlled by the intellect. They believe that even desire, even disease, even the body can be controlled 100% of the time by the brain.

But for some of us, sex has never been rational. Eggheads look at two men fucking and see decision-making, risk-taking, safety measures, and a commitment or lack of commitment to health. That's not what my sex is about, even when I do my best to keep things safe.

My sex is usually spontaneous, surprising, and full of exploration. It's as much about pleasure, power and joy as about health and safety. I understand why people see my testing positive as a result of a bad decision, but to me, my unprotected sex was never a conscious decision. I take responsibility for it happening, but what leads up to sex without condoms is complicated and powerful. And to take all the risk out of sex--going home with strangers, having sex at highway rest stops, tying up your boyfriend--for many of us, would take much of the pleasure.

I want gay men to do their best to avoid HIV, but I don't want those of us who get infected to feel shame about it. We're having sex in a Petri dish where a lot of the other fags are already infected. Of course there's going to be some new infections. Even if we use condoms 97% of the time, there's still going to be some infections.

I want this to be a world where gay men in particular face the complexity of new infections head-on, and stop reducing it to dumb, simple answers like "bad decisions" and "low self-esteem." Because the truth is, if you become infected, the simple ways people understand these things leads you directly into a pit of guilt and shame. It's only once you've gone beyond the simplistic answers and look at your life and your actions in a complicated and empathetic way, that you find an alternative way to move forward, a world beyond guilt and shame.

Victor:

HIV can be a struggle, no doubt about it but I am a Latin gay man. Struggle is nothing new. I have been extremely healthy the past few years; my issues have not been physical but psycho-

logical. Telling my family was hard and I still remember how it broke my mom's heart when she found out. Moms have a hard time understanding that HIV is different than it was 10 years ago. All they hear is that they could outlive their child. She has come along way though now that she sees how healthy I am. She still nags me about things, like all mothers, but she is not as anxious and fearful as before.

Oh and that wacky HIV knew just what buttons to push too. Body image, online hookups, dating. Lypodistrophy, or vulgarly called, "Fat redistribution" is something a former fat kid never wants to hear. I put all this work into a body only to learn in can turn into some misshapen creature because of my meds? Well, I am not as diligent about going to the gym as I used to be and the world is not going to end if I skip a day or have a piece of pie. So whatever challenges it presents I will confront it with good-natured aplomb

Shortly after testing positive I was at Club Universe and I hooked up with this guy and we were dancing and making out and getting really hot and heavy. He was my height, beefy, part Latin and very passionate. We decided we would go home together and we made our way out of the club and onto the street. While we were at the curb waiting for a cab I decided I had better tell him I am was positive before we went home.

To say he looked disappointed was an understatement. It became clear that going home together wasn't going to work out for either one of us. I was hurt but I couldn't really be mad at him because it made him uncomfortable. He gave me a polite smile, said goodbye and got into the cab and I just stood there on the curb for a moment in the misty San Francisco dawn. Thank god I still had a hit of Ecstasy in my pocket. I went back inside and danced into the morning with my good friends.

I remember how much it would bother me to see expressions like "clean", "healthy" and "UB2" in people's profiles online. Here I was again at an impasse with my profile and even the most brilliant wordsmith couldn't get around being poz.

Then I just let it go. Who cares if they don't want to have sex with me? Big fucking deal! And what's more they have every right to take whatever precautions make them comfortable and so do I. I choose to have sex exclusively with poz men because then not only do I not have to worry about the issues the negative men have but I can fuck without condoms. It does makes finding guys to date a bit harder. All of a sudden the field of men got much narrower but with my exceedingly high standards finding the right one has always been a problem.

There was a time after I tested positive that I felt ashamed, dirty, like damaged goods. It wasn't until I met other poz guys around my age that I was able to see other people going through the same thing and then I could let go of it all.

I also felt relief. Freedom. Like, finally. Finally, I don't have to worry about when I'll test positive. Finally I won't have to worry if the condom slipped off. Finally, I won't have to ask a million questions before some hot guy fucks me. Finally I can be piggy and nasty without lingering fear and guilt

I'm not trying to be coy here. I am well aware of the down sides of having HIV. But I also know the down sides of not having HIV. The anxiety, the overwhelming fear, the guilt. Gay men's sex lives will always be intricately tied to HIV. Negative men will worry about infection while poz men deal with infection. Of course, no one wants a life threatening illness, but I know myself and if I were negative today I wonder how long it would be before I became infected.

I have no regrets. I don't regret a single party, a single bump, a single fuck. Actually I do regret those dreadful highlights I put in my hair 3 summers ago.

AIDS groups spent thousands of dollars on fear based campaigns telling me when I was negative how horrible it would be to have HIV: diarrhea, weight loss, and that I would have to take truck-loads of pills everyday. After testing positive I cleared out an entire section of my cupboard for my pills. Then my doctor gave me 2 pills to take at night and I said, "That's it?" If they are going to use the experience of poz men as an example for their prevention then I am going to speak openly about some of the upsides for those of us with HIV. Let me be very clear, I am not a role model

For those of us who value our sex lives: our bodies, desires, orgasms and our erotic adventures with men, once the HIV moment happens, doors open into new kinds of freedoms and new kinds of worlds. Sure safe sex is hot sex but raw sex is hotter

Finally I don't have to worry about those goddamn condoms!

Today I am free from much of the fear and trauma that used to dance around my sex life. It's not about disease and infection and being bad a bad gay boy but it's about pleasure and enjoyment and it's about living.

Jack:

I wonder where all this talk will lead us. I'm older, a different generation. I lived through those years where half of the men I had cocktails with got infected and died within just a few years. I felt that tidal wave hit. I went to funerals every week, did my volunteer work, and prayed I'd be safe. Can't you young guys learn from what my generation lived through? Can't you appreciate the horror of what HIV can do? Can't you find ways to have fun, enjoy your sex, but not let half your generation spend their lives in medical clinics?

Victor:

For men of your generation, HIV means death and funerals and disability and loss. You lived through the tidal wave. But those were years before treatments, before we knew there were long-term non-progressors, before we knew you could have HIV and still be pretty healthy for a long time. The fact is that you lived through it. You kept yourselves and our culture alive and that always assured me that survival was possible.

Men of my generation have a different relationship to HIV. We are the generation of HIV and we grew up with it, just like we did with Ricky Schroeder and Shannon Doherty. We don't know of a time when HIV wasn't a part of our sex lives and identity. HIV is not the enormous tragedy that you think it is, it's simply a fact of life.

I didn't go out of my way to get HIV, but now that I have it, I have to admit, it's not the center of my life. I visit my doctor regularly, I take care of my health, and I get on with living. I'm not a "person with HIV." HIV does not define me, control me, or rule my life. It also has not robbed me of my sexuality. Positive people don't have to be desexualized and I still have a raging libido and lots of great sex. For those interested I can elaborate on that later, in private.

The world I want to live in integrates HIV into the way we all think about health, where like lung cancer, heart attacks or car accidents, it is one of the threats out there we hope to avoid but one we will cope with if it comes our way.

Jack:

How did I end up being the geezer at this party?

What I hear is that sex is valuable and complicated and that people who become infected may have simply lost the crapshoot of life and ended up with HIV on their plate.

I can get behind that.

What I hear is that testing positive today puts men in a position where they have to explain themselves, in a way that people with other diseases don't experience.

That seems unfair to me also.

But what I don't get is this: are we asking people to accept that HIV will continue to infect gay men for the rest of our lives? Have we given up the hope, the dream, that we could eliminate HIV, so that all gay men could some day once again enjoy sex without thinking of sickness, thinking of disease, thinking of death?

I can make common ground with you in many areas, but this is one dream that I won't give up.

Sometimes I think I was put in the position I'm in so that I can see this epidemic from a unique perspective. I spent 25 years watching AIDS happen to my generation thinking somehow I'd been spared. Test after test came back negative. Then, at age 50, I find out I now have HIV. Egad, I now have AIDS. Now I get to see everything through the eyes of the infected.

I can't tell you what it was like to test positive in 1985, because that did not happen to me. But I do know what it is like to test positive in 2005. It's something that marks you as damaged goods,

foolish, somehow out of control. I've had friends look at me with incredulity: their eyes asking, "How could you let this happen to you today, after so many years of behaving yourself?"

I want to live in a world where you can test positive and you don't move into a long cycle of terror and guilt and shame and embarrassment. I'm not saying I want it to be something like, "No big deal," on hearing the doctor give you the news, but I don't understand why it has to be traumatizing today. In some ways, it feels like we're stuck in understandings of HIV that were created 20 years ago and, even if the reality is different today, we still feel the emotions of 1985.

In fact, that's what the entire problem seems to circulate around: so many of us are locked in 1985 ways of seeing HIV and sex and gay men's health, when we have really moved into another era.

Bo:

A world beyond guilt and shame. That's what I want. That's what I deserve. That's what I demand.

We aren't heroes. And we aren't villains. We're simply men, human beings, like all human beings. Trying to get by. Trying to find our way through a world of terror and joy, pleasure and danger, passion and poison.

Just trying to put together a life like all lives...

Filled with comfort and safety. Filled with risk and excitement.

Where we breathe. Where we dance. Where we drive fast on freeways.

Where we eat. Where we fuck. Where we skydive.

Jack	Victor	Bo
Eat	Fuck	Skydive
Feel	Leap	Penetrate
Swallow	Heat	Bleed
Scream	Cut	Seed
Test	Positive	Now