



Johnny Autin, A Positive Life. Photo: Donata Kukyré.

A positive life

Choreographer **Johnny Autin** opens up about living with HIV and his ambitions to make an impact with audiences and communities

My name is Johnny Autin. I am originally from France and I have called Birmingham my home for nearly five years. I am an international dance artist and the Creative Director of Autin Dance Theatre, established in 2013. As a dance maker, I tend to draw on real life stories and experiences to inspire socially engaged artistic performances. I like exploring and tackling subject matters through creative consultations, meeting and talking with a lot of people. It's a collaborative process and it keeps the work honest and relevant in my opinion.

In 2011, I found out that I was HIV positive. A nurse broke the difficult news to me during a routine check-up and my very first reaction was to ask her about my career as a dance artist.

"But I am a dancer," I said. "Can I even carry on my work with the virus?" I had a lot to learn.

She explained at length the ins and outs of living with HIV and that not much would change for me, that it was a manageable condition with the proper medical care and attention. I also remember her saying that the stigma surrounding HIV and the

difficult feelings and questions about the virus would be the hardest to deal with. She was right.

The diagnosis was quite a shock, and I tried my best to be brave. I knew it wasn't a death sentence, like it used to be, but it made me realise my own fragile mortality and that changed something within me. I decided that I would create a meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling life for myself and learn how to use that to make an impact and a difference to the lives of others.

Today I am happy, healthy, and in a loving relationship. I went early on

treatment and have an undetectable viral load. Counselling sessions have helped me come to terms with the diagnosis.

I began to realise the extent of the psychosocial and psychological stresses that one suffers through fear of rejection, low self-esteem, shame, social stigma, disease progression, and the uncertainties associated with future management of the virus. This reaffirmed for me the importance of talking about HIV and educating others.

A Positive Life

In 2015, I received a small commission bursary to try out a new choreographic idea. The initial research and development (R&D) combined elements of theatre and dance to tell the true stories of people living with HIV and was inspired by the 30th anniversary of the discovery of the virus. I attempted to confront the prejudices and discrimination faced by seropositive people with personal stories of hope and acceptance.

Further support from funders and partners, two intensive R&D periods, and three years later we are in the final phase of our project, A Positive Life, which includes further artistic development of the work along with a national tour in autumn 2018. It became clear to me throughout the process that the work didn't have to be about HIV stories only, and certainly didn't have to be about me. My personal experience started this whole journey, but as I learnt and discovered more about sexual health, sex education and various philosophical movements like sex positivity, I knew we had to expand the themes of our research wider, and engage with teenagers as participants and audience members for this project.

A Positive Life is an immersive and interactive dance theatre experience for young people aged 11-24. It follows the stories of five characters during a 60-minute performance combining dance, physical theatre and spoken word. The piece explores issues around sexual health, sex education stories and a wide range of taboos.

The company has been touring the piece across the UK to secondary schools, universities, youth, community and arts centres, reaching a wide range of diverse teenagers and young adults

I am trying to address sexual health stigma head on, with the aim of inspiring young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

with live performances alongside a series of creative and educational workshops. For most young people, it was their first time engaging with such an immersive and interactive live performance.

Young people have been at the heart of our creative process from the outset. They have been taking part in workshops and dialogues exploring issues around sexual health, sharing sex education stories and discussing a wide range of taboos related to gender, sexuality, body image, sex, consent and self-love.

In our workshops, we start with a physical warm-up and some fun icebreaker games. These set the mood for more in-depth choreographic tasks, movement explorations, and conversations, usually in pairs. These conversations around taboos then feed our signature 'six word story' exercise which is a short creative writing task inspired by the (urban) legend of Ernest Hemingway's famous challenge to write a novel in six words and is led by spoken word performer Jasmine Gardosi. It tests the participants' ability to create their own succinct masterpieces around the themes of love, sex, and relationships. They also encourage participants to share their own stories and self-reflect, by questioning why the taboos are taboos in the first place.

We realised quite quickly that most young men and women we met had received sound sex and relationship education at school but were missing the safe spaces to continue those conversations, to ask questions and share stories, to talk openly about their insecurities and think critically about their ever-changing adolescent environment.

With A Positive Life, I am trying to address sexual health stigma head on, with the aim of inspiring young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. A Positive Life has been a challenging and equally rewarding professional opportunity for Autin Dance Theatre. To develop and pilot this accessible performance and participatory project in collaboration with our partners, artistic collaborators, young people, participants, audience members and supporters has been a real catalyst, on an artistic, personal and organisational level.

"This immersive piece both transported and drew the audience into a vulnerable world of first relationships and sexual understanding. The work combined innovative dance, which at times traded places with physical theatre, enabling a bridge into multidisciplinary performance, where text and dance could sit at ease alongside each other," said Claudette Bryanston, Executive and Artistic Director, Albany Theatre.

"It is no easy task to take the theme of sex education and transport it with such high production values that the work stands up in any context," she added.

I like to challenge the work we do as a company, both in its form and its content – and I am always seeking out new exciting collaborations. This summer we are researching and creating a brand new piece, Queer Words, with queer performers and in partnership with local organisations including Beatfreaks Collective, an art activism platform and spoken word specialist, Birmingham LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans), and Dance Hub Birmingham (Culture Central). We will gather real life stories and anecdotes from the community and investigate 'toxic' ideals and crisis within masculinity through a multi-disciplinary project that combines story-telling, spoken word, dance and physical theatre, it will premiere at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in August.

Info

www.autindt.com

A Positive Life is funded by Arts Council England with the support of Midlands Arts Centre - MAC, Birmingham Education Partnership, and Arts Connect.