

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO BILLY NEWTON-DAVIS



I won't forget the day in 2004 when my friend Ryan Lapidus shared an idea with me. Fashion Cares would be turning twenty in 2006, and was ripe for a documentary treatment. Sitting on my couch with him, hearing that was hearing the best idea I'd heard in a long time. True, neither of us had any experience producing a film, but why let a silly little thing like that stop us? The result of our efforts airs on Global TV Saturday November 11th at 7 p.m.

*DecAIDS – Anything Is Possible*, is titled that way because it's true. Once Ryan and I committed to make it happen, the documentary took on a life of it's own, full of happy accidents and crazy coincidences that served as constant signposts for us that the idea was meant to be; we were on the right path.

By the time January of this year came, while we'd received official support from Fashion Cares and the AIDS Committee of Toronto, and pitched to an enthusiastic production company Peace Point Television, we had yet to hear from Global TV, the final piece of the puzzle to make *DecAIDS* a go. Ryan and I, believers nonetheless, forged ahead regardless with what needed to be done as though we'd already been greenlit (it would take until early spring to get the phone call that had us screaming with excitement).

So in January, with *DecAIDS* still unofficial, I was busy interviewing people for the Fashion Cares 20th anniversary retrospective coffee table book (research that would prove invaluable in the months to come), which Phillip Ing had asked me to help write when we approached him shortly after Christmas for his blessing of *DecAIDS*. **Billy Newton-Davis**, whom I only knew to say hello to, was one of my assigned interview subjects, and over coffee one afternoon we had a great talk.

Billy's name is one with an impressive list of credits attached to it. He's sung and danced on

Broadway, his debut album, *Love Is A Contact Sport* won him one of three Juno Awards, you know him from The Nylons, and everyone can recall 'Can't Live With You, Can't Live Without You', his duet with Céline Dion.

But what's also remarkable about him is his forthrightness about being HIV-positive. The day we met to chat for the coffee table book, Billy told me a story that was so honest and so brave that I was in turn inspired to share *DecAIDS*, which, because it wasn't official, Ryan and I had been keeping under wraps.

I asked Billy if he'd consider being interviewed for *DecAIDS*. We were going to take viewers behind the scenes of Fashion Cares, shadowing Phillip Ing as he prepared for his swan song, but we also wanted to show the cause, HIV / AIDS, from a human angle. Having been HIV-positive for as long as Fashion Cares had existed, Billy's point of view was unique.

Thankfully, he agreed, and the rest is history. Last week, I sat down with the multi-talented performer and showed him *DecAIDS - Anything Is Possible* for the first time. We talked immediately afterwards, where he shared with me what it's like to reveal such intimate details on camera, what re-living the early years of HIV/AIDS was like, and how it is he has survived a deadly disease for over two decades.



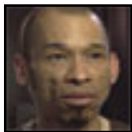
**How was that for you?**



Wow. You know, as an entertainer you're always criticizing yourself and looking at how you look ...



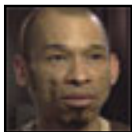
**It's hard to be objective when you're watching yourself the way you just did.**



Many people have come to me, Shaun, and said, 'You know, you have expressed your feelings about HIV/AIDS, and you changed how I felt about it.' And that's my mission.



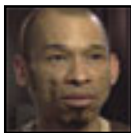
**I remember when I was interviewing you for the coffee table book. You were telling me stories and that's when I knew you'd be perfect to interview for *DecAIDS*.**



*DecAIDS* is so forward. It's a unique kind of documentary. You guys told the story so that you get some information, but it was also about Fashion Cares. It brings back that real love. The most profound thing I got from it was the idea: wouldn't it be great if we never had to have another Fashion Cares.



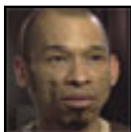
**Wouldn't it be.**



That was the wildest. I think Phillip says that.



**I'm so glad you're cool. I was nervous showing it to you.**



Well sure, there's stuff in there. I was looking at myself. I physically have changed. And I haven't seen myself look like that. You know, you look at yourself and you're HIV-positive and you see things. I look at my face; I've aged, too. But I have to let it go.



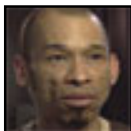
**And what you see other people don't. By now we've shown *DecAIDS* to a few people. And the overriding comment is that you steal the show. So no one is looking at you, going, 'He's aged; he's HIV'. You are so open, so honest, that you suck people in, right off the bat. I ran into someone on my way back here to meet you, who'd seen it. I told him I was about to show you, and he said, 'Billy made me cry.'**



The opening is like ... I don't know what to say to you guys.



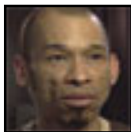
**We're just glad you like it.**



To be such a part of it.



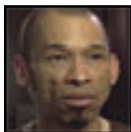
**A huge part of it. You're the heart.**



Phillip is so wonderful. And David really touched me.



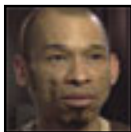
**As it was playing, I heard you reacting to the moments of the past. Like when Ronald Regan came on.**



That. That got me. Because I don't remember it. I took what he said a couple of ways.



**I took what he said to mean the homos had better keep their dicks in their pants until we have a cure for AIDS.**



That's what I took it to say. But I don't remember him saying that.



**You also reacted to a lot of the old AIDS headlines we showed, when no one even knew the disease at all. Do you remember such headlines?**



No.



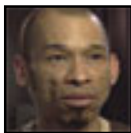
**I do. Even though I was a kid. I remember being aware of them when I looked at the newspaper as an adolescent, because even though I'd never had sex before, I knew I was one of those guys, one of those men who were getting sick and who were dying.**



I was so busy avoiding it all, in denial of it all. I saw the headlines, but ...



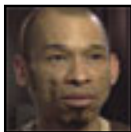
**Does that seem like a long time ago?**



*(Holds his hands far apart.)* It feels like there's this big period of time, Shaun. And there's no backwards and there's no forwards. It's just this big chunk of time. You walk through life; you're dealing with something at that time. Seeing this, I'm really back in the moment of you asking me all those questions, filming here in your house, in fact! *(Laughs.)* But like I said, I'm sitting in that time capsule, watching *DecAIDS*. I think the most profound thing about it is continually trying to find a way to get rid of AIDS. The cocktail has come along and it's helped, but it still hasn't gotten rid of it. But I was reminded watching this that people didn't get to experience all that I have been able to experience and am experiencing now, with the cocktail.



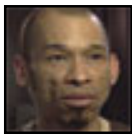
**Do you feel guilty? Any 'why me, why do I get to survive'?**



No. Not anymore. I got therapy, honey! *(Bursts out laughing.)*



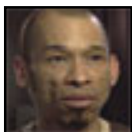
**But you have felt that before.**



Always. Oh, yeah, definitely. You think about all kinds of things that relate to AIDS. Who's gone, and what happened, things they did, what I saw, what I felt. I had a friend who had that rough death. He just went into dementia, and he was oblivious to it all. Thank god. Because he was so anal and so uptight about life, and so perfect and so wonderful and so handsome that he wouldn't have been able to deal with the fact he was such a mess in the end. I did the best that I could do for him, because at the time I was dealing with the same things. And I had to ... I had to swim. In that deep ocean. Just like everybody else. And just had to keep trying to find my way to the beach. If you're out there in the middle of the ocean and you're lost, and a big wave comes along, either you keep fighting to find your way back, or you don't.



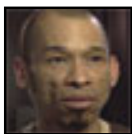
**And what did you do to find your way back?**



My art. My singing. After seeing *DecAIDS* just now, there's a real feeling that singing has really kept me alive. There is just some stuff I always want to accomplish, so I just continue to journey through it.



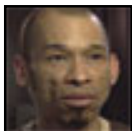
**Just to rewind you, when you say your art got you through it, do you mean that you wanted to live another day to make art, or art allowed you to express yourself so you could survive?**



I think it's more like, 'I've got to sing next month, so I've got to take care of myself so I can do it.' And then the months just keep piling up.



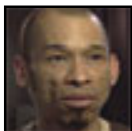
**And suddenly you're watching yourself in a documentary twenty years later.**



But you know, the thoughts of death surround my temple, my body, and sometimes I think about it. If I should start falling tomorrow, how will I do it? I think, 'Well, I'll just get the help that I need, and the love, and the family around me to get me through to the point.'



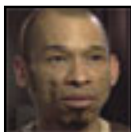
**Do you think about dying much?**



No. Even since we first talked, months ago, I think that I have something to say, something to feel, and something to sing. And I'm looking forward to the year 2007 now. Because I do recall when I was diagnosed, I couldn't reach very far. So just imagine, as I say in the documentary: I had a career, I had all these things going on, but back then it was a day at a time. Now I can reach a year or two or three at a time into the future.



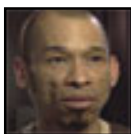
**You're a rare public figure, being as open as you are about being HIV-positive. Why?**



I think when I did the vigil at Dundas Square this summer for the AIDS Conference, I was moved.



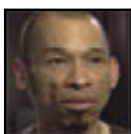
**Everyone was. I was. But it's not a lot of public figures who would be so open about their HIV status, who would agree to appear in a documentary and discuss it as openly as you do. And this all came to be because you told me a story that day I interviewed you for the coffee table book, where you were performing and you got up on stage and told everyone you were HIV-positive. And the audience reacted to that, you said, and so you told them that it was okay, that you were okay. You assured them that it was all cool, and you were going to sing a song. Where does that come from? That fascinates me.**



It's scary to say it, to talk about it, but once you do it, you've taken more weight off your shoulder. You've expressed yourself. You chip off a little bit more of that lie. Because you know, Shaun, people with HIV and AIDS still live such big lies. And in our community, it's a huge lie. It's accepted in our community, but it's a huge lie when it comes to our camaraderie.



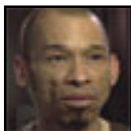
**Do you think there's an 'us' and 'them'?**



Oh, *definitely*. And it's very interesting – we've talked about this – young kids think they're immune. And then they're HIV and they think they're *still* immune! But on the other hand, there's prostate cancer in men, and colon cancer and testicle cancer, all those things people get. But do I really think about it? Delve in it? Rest in it? I can't. I just, can't. I think about HIV in different ways, different days. But I certainly don't think I'm gonna die soon. I constantly think about how I can protect myself, ways I can do that, and ways I can protect others.



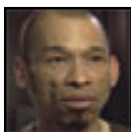
**What are those ways?**



Being honest. Being forthright. Being (*pauses*) fearless. Being out there. Jumping into the ocean and swimming hard. And longing to seek wisdom.



**What have you learned? I know I ask you that in *DecAIDS*, but let me ask that again, now that you've seen it.**



Well I say this in *DecAIDS*: anything is possible. I've learned to listen, to accept others in what they might think their shortcomings are. But always being fast to say, 'Oh, that's nothing.' I've learned that you encourage others; I think I encourage myself by doing that. I've learned that other people really matter. I've really learned a lot about people's mental capabilities, and how our brain operates when it's infused with a lot of positive energy, how it can do anything. When people see you are upbeat, they become upbeat. We are the cause and effect of it all.



**The day we shot *Fashion Cares*, we had the longest day. Ryan and his crew were with David, and my crew and I were with you. So whenever we see the scene where you are getting ready to go to *Fashion Cares*, and I said this to Ryan: I hate it. It was such a long hard day – not on the whole – but when we were at your place shooting, I felt so in your way –**



All of you were in my way.



**And I know you, so I felt a responsibility. I can't just shut off and act like I don't care what you think as an entire crew invades your life and your home. I did care, and I could see you were getting bothered. And after all that? It all adds up to just a tiny moment in the finished product.**



But shooting that was important. But also, it tested my ability to do all that I could do that day with you guys shooting me. And those feelings I had, that was my stuff. It wasn't yours. You had to get a job done, we all had to get a job done. But that is what it all boils down to, Shaun. We exist, and I've gotten another chance to talk about my experience, my journey. I'm really glad that you guys gave me that opportunity.