

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Director Bo Frazier and dramaturg Luke Daniel White reflect on their research trip to the Stonewall 50/WorldPride celebration in New York City last summer



Bo and Luke in front of The Stonewall Inn; June 2019.

June 27th, 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots which occurred in the legendary New York gay bar in the city's West Village. To commemorate 50 years of the LGBTQ+ movement which was largely sparked by the riots, New York's annual pride festivities were paired with WorldPride – a global pride celebration which is hosted in a different city each year. A record 5 million people took to the streets of the city to celebrate. With generous funding provided by the Department of Theatre Arts, director Bo Frazier and dramaturg Luke Daniel White were able to be there for a week of attending performances, exhibits, and the pride parade.

LDW: Of all the performances we saw, what resonated with you the most and did any shape your approach to directing *Hit the Wall*?

BF: We were invited to take part in The Drama League's community reading of *Street Theater* by Doric Wilson which was the first play written about Stonewall. We were just sitting around in a circle, a bunch of queer, trans, and people of color theatre artists of today bringing life to this play which was written by someone who was there. It felt really special. I wondered if Ike Holter read it before writing *Hit the Wall* because there are many similarities. Another thing that really resonated with me as a trans non-binary artist was the Sylvia Rivera living history performance, written and performed by my friend Summer Minerva at the New York Historical Society. Summer did so much research into Sylvia who was a trans rights activist and Stonewall veteran – and she also looks just like her. It was informative, beautiful, and heartwarming to see this unsung hero be brought to life in this huge New York institution. We also saw a performance of a new opera about Stonewall. Being able to see what worked in that production and what didn't work definitely helped me as director for this show. Something I felt they captured beautifully was the morning after the riot: the city being asleep but the air being so heavy with a feeling of pain and hope. It's something that I want to evoke with this production.

BF: What was an experience you had that you were most excited to bring back to Iowa as dramaturg?

LDW: It was being at the LGBT Center for a panel discussion by members of the Gay Liberation Front. We were sharing space with so many Stonewall veterans and that was so special for me as a gay man who benefits from their struggle daily. And as dramaturg, it helped me understand Stonewall beyond historical fact and, instead, as being the result of brave humans who are still with us

today. Though, the most impactful moment of that night was when a man sitting right behind us stood up during the Q&A portion of the evening and said, "I just want to give voice to all those queens who are not in this room tonight." He was speaking about the trans people, people of color, and gay men who were responsible for Stonewall and are not alive today because of violence, systemic oppression, and the AIDS epidemic. We had a moment of silence for them and there was not a dry eye in the house. I always come back to that moment when I think about the importance of *Hit the Wall* in the way it humanizes and honors those brave souls by bringing their story front and center for the stage.

BF: What were your feelings on pride weekend and the parade in light of our research that week?

LDW: That millions of people were on the streets of New York safely celebrating this history was really beautiful, especially knowing that the first march in the month following Stonewall was attended by only a few hundred people and the first pride march a year later was attended only by a few thousand. It seemed like a tangible mark of the progress that's been made in 50 years. Alternatively, learning the details of the riot that week made me feel complicated about the manner in which we're celebrating pride today. Much of the parade in New York seemed like a commercial for big corporations and presidential candidates. And when we finally made it into the village to tour Stonewall and the surrounding neighborhood, the police had closed off Christopher Street so that United Airlines could literally film a commercial about how queer-friendly they are! But what are these corporations and candidates doing to protect their LGBTQ+ employees and constituents? It feels like the spirit of Stonewall is getting away from us.

LDW: You opted to not go to the pride parade that week. Why was that?

BF: I've always struggled with pride my entire life. I knew that I was part of the community but I never felt welcomed in the community, specifically the predominant cis white gay men's community. That week I saw who was leading the events, who was talking at those events, who was on the posters, and I did not feel welcome. There was a trans pride and a reclaiming pride event which were led by anti-rainbow capitalist, queer (not gay) organizations. Unfortunately, we didn't even hear about these until it was too late because they were not advertised as well as other events like the parade. I was reminded of the speech Sylvia Rivera gave in Washington Square park at the 1973 pride rally where she was begging and fighting for the larger community to care about trans people and was booed by the crowd. It feels like the LGBTQ+ community, as a whole, is still not informed or even compassionate for the 'T' in LGBTQ+. It got to me the day of the parade. I chose to have a self-care day at home and I don't regret it.

BF: Did you encounter anything difficult while you were there?

LDW: Yeah, I was out one night with some friends and we were harassed by an older man on the subway platform who told us, "Trump's gonna get you f****s." We also encountered another man who was harassing some volunteers stringing up rainbow balloons outside their office building. It stung to be in this city for the biggest pride celebration in the world and see how it's not even universally accepted by the people who live there.

BF: Yeah, I was surprised and saddened by the general treatment I received walking around New York, hateful comments said to me, transphobic digs and gawks. It made me realize how much farther we still have to go.