

onstage

Singing the body electric

Decades after encountering Walt Whitman's radical poetry, Patrick Scully pays tribute to him in a new dance-theater work.

By ROHAN PRESTON
rohan.preston@startribune.com

Walt Whitman is best known for "Leaves of Grass," the landmark poetry collection first published in 1855 that he revised throughout his lifetime and which included "Song of Myself," an anthem of American individuality, and the overtly sensual "I Sing the Body Electric."

Among the countless people he inspired was Twin Cities dancer, choreographer and performance impresario Patrick Scully.

In 1969, when Scully was a junior at Roseville High School, his English teacher mentioned Whitman in a way that gave Scully permission to become the free-spirited artist and activist that he is today.

"She announced one day that the next writer we will be studying was Walt Whitman, the father of free verse," said Scully. "Now, FREE was also an acronym for a group of LGBT activists at the U. And this student asked a question that obliquely referred to them. I will never forget that the teacher said: 'If you're asking if Walt Whitman was a homosexual, the answer is yes.' She said it so matter-of-factly, and moved on. That was a profound affirmation for me that a man who loved other men was par for the course."

Scully has been carrying around the germ of an idea to do a Whitman tribute since then. About three years ago, he decided in earnest to work on a multidisciplinary show that is at once a Whitman stage biography and tribute that's

also about his own growth. A workshop production of Scully's "Leaves of Grass — Uncut" opens Thursday as part of Fresh Ink, a new-works series at Illusion Theater in Minneapolis.

"I'm surprised how many people know Whitman as a figure in poetry but not his larger role as a father of gay liberation," said Scully. "He was visited by Oscar Wilde. He was open about his passion at a time when we didn't even have the language for it."

Journeys into history and spirit

This year's Fresh Ink has a theme of journeys — historical, emotional, spiritual. The series kicked off last weekend with a reading of producing artistic director Michael Robins' "Walking Across Poland," about his grandmother's escape to the United States from the pogroms of Russia. Roberta Carlson composed the music. Fresh Ink also includes James Still's "Miranda," a piece about an undercover CIA operative who lost a relative in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and goes undercover to fight terrorists in Yemen as a theater director who is staging "Othello."

"We never really try to have a theme to each season; they emerge organically," said Robins. "We try to stay true to the name by getting work in that's original and fresh."

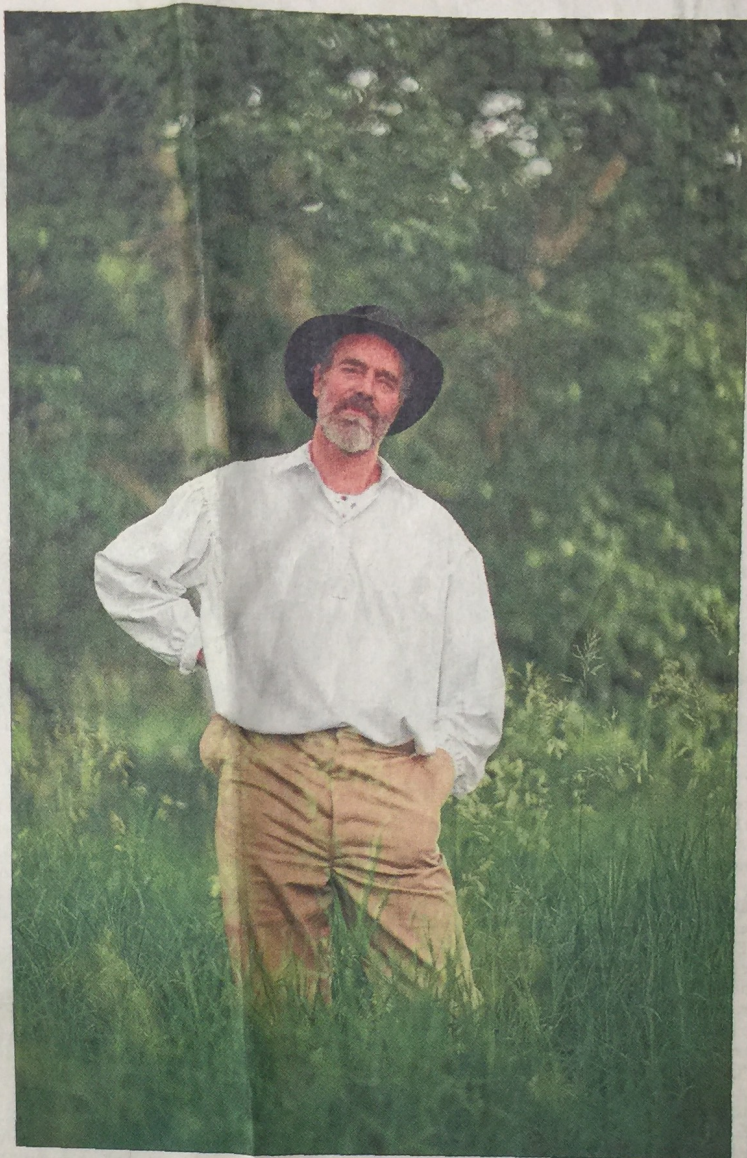
In addition to poetry, Scully's show has music and choreography performed by 18 male dancers.

"It is one of the few times you'll see that many male dancers on any stage," said Scully, who added that it is easy to dance to Whitman's poems.

"Whitman's language is so body-based, so physical, it begs you to press your body up against his words," he said.

Experimental playground

Scully started his namesake Patrick's Cabaret in 1986, a play-



JEFF WHEELER • jeff.wheeler@startribune.com
Patrick Scully channeled a famous Walt Whitman pose near his Nicollet Island home.



"Leaves of Grass" inspired Scully to create a Whitman tribute.

LEAVES OF GRASS — UNCUT

What: Written and directed by Patrick Scully.

When: 8 p.m. Thu.-Sat., 7 p.m. next Sun.

Where: Illusion Theatre, eighth floor, Cowles Center, 528 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$14-\$19, 612-339-4944 or illusiontheater.org.

ground of experimental and cutting-edge multidisciplinary work, some of it springing from his own biography. He left his leadership post in 2001 but returned four years later, at the board's urging, to help stabilize the south Minneapolis venue.

Scully stepped down for good in 2008. He has traveled and done shows worldwide, including a solo piece, "Thrive."

"It was highly autobiographical," he said. "I looked back over 25 years of living with HIV."

During this later stage, Scully also choreographed a ballet using boats on the River Havel in Potsdam, Germany.

"In the same way that different animals have distinct moving styles, kayaks, sailboats, racing sculls, pontoon boats all have different moving qualities," he said. "It was like orchestrating instruments together."

"Leaves of Grass" is the biggest show he's done in the Twin Cities in recent years. Whitman, he said, haunts his mind and movements. Scully lives in a house on Nicollet Island that is of a Whitmanesque vintage. He finds himself quoting the poet often. He grew a beard and dresses like Whitman, who famously wore a flat-top hat that he cocked as he pleased. Still, Whitman, who was about 6 feet tall, was considerably shorter than Scully, who is 6 feet 8.

"He was tall for someone who was born in 1819," Scully said. "And he was literally head and shoulders over most of the people who lived in his time."

Scully said that he hopes "Leaves of Grass — Uncut" will have some longevity.

"I'm 60, and when I look back over my lifetime of work in the performing arts, I'm inspired by Hal Holbrook's one-man show about Mark Twain," he said. "Holbrook first did that piece in '54, when he was 29 years old. He still does it. I hope to pay tribute to a man who helped liberate me for the rest of my life."

Associated Press

Rohan Preston • 612-673-4390