

Variety

November 18, 1996 - November 24, 1996

SECTION: FOB/LEGIT; Pg. 6

LENGTH: 606 words

HEADLINE: NOISES OFF: The Plague Years

BYLINE: JEREMY GERARD

DATELINE: NEW YORK

BODY:

The plague ended, maybe.

Last week the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times featured remarkably similar stories about the end of AIDS. Both were by prominent journalists who are HIV-positive, and both got the kind of display reserved for the most important stories. The Journal's, by a features editor named David Sanford, ran on Friday, Nov. 8, began on page one and tracked the author's 15-year battle with HIV. A year ago, Sanford wrote, he was expecting to be dead within weeks; now his doctor was advising him to shed some excess weight and he was planning his retirement.

Two days later, the cover of the Times Magazine was given over entirely to the beginning of a story by Andrew Sullivan, who recently resigned as editor of the New Republic and announced that he had tested positive for HIV in 1993. "Something profound has occurred in these last few months," Sullivan wrote about advances in treating AIDS, and indeed it has. Nothing that will bring back Charles Ludlam or Michael Bennett or, for that matter, my son's beloved godfather, whose name, I'd like you to know, was Timothy Grutzius.

Still, as Sanford put it, a "miracle" nonetheless.

If you are a journalist writing about the entertainment industry, you will have spent much of the last decade and a half writing about AIDS, too. You will have written countless stories about the toll AIDS has taken on the arts, as the disease cut a swath through every segment of the industry. Not long ago,

nearly everyone I knew in the world of the theater seemed to keep a private list, hidden somewhere in the back of a desk drawer and taken out with horrible regularity to cross off the latest name, then returned until the next time.

Now, however, with the advent of high-tech drugs called protease inhibitors, "a diagnosis of HIV infection is not just different in degree today than, say, five years ago," wrote Sullivan. "It is different in kind. It no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness."

Having "outlived friends and peers," Sanford wrote, "I find myself in the unusual position of telling people how I've survived this scourge, something I never thought would happen. I am probably more likely to be hit by a truck than to die of AIDS."

I spent all week talking with people about the good news. Not surprisingly, the reaction has been mixed, a true sense of hope tinged with remorse and survivor's guilt, and not a little trepidation: A battle may have been won but the war is by no means over.

"It's unsettling," my friend Tom Viola, the valiant producing director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, told me. "I'm HIV-positive and I have lots of friends who are; we're trying to reconfigure what we thought about having a limited time to live. But as a fundraiser, it's hit a nerve. There are going to be thousands of people who will not have access to these drugs. People will need assistance for years to come." Now Viola talks about the shift going on in insurance payments from funerals to drugs.

A few nights ago, thinking about the people I have known and loved and lost to HIV, I listened to "Children of Darkness," a chillingly prescient, three-decades-old Richard Farina song I always thought should have been the official theme song of the AIDS generation ("And where will we take our pleasure/When our bodies have been denied?").

I began writing about the theater long before the beginning of the plague, but no subject more profoundly influenced what I

have written as witness to its devastation. It has been my Dresden, my Shiloh, my My Lai. As it has so many people I know, the good news fills me with hope and yet all I can do is weep.

LOAD-DATE: November 19, 1996