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## Review: Diversionary's 'One in Two' asks audience who will be next in the HIV roulette?

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Kevane La'Marr Coleman, left, Carter Piggee and Durwood Murray in Diversionary Theatre's "One in Two." (Simpatika)

# Donja R. Love’s provocative play looks at continuing crisis in the Black gay community

BY PAM KRAGEN

OCT. 4, 2021 10:35 AM PT



Just as the COVID pandemic will no doubt inspire playwrights in future years, the AIDS epidemic has been a major inspiration for many plays produced over the past 35 years at Diversionary Theatre, the third-oldest LGBTQ theater in America.



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in two gay or bisexual Black men in America will be diagnosed with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, in their lifetime. That compares to one in four among Latino gay and bisexual men and one in 11 gay or bisexual White men, according to 2018 figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

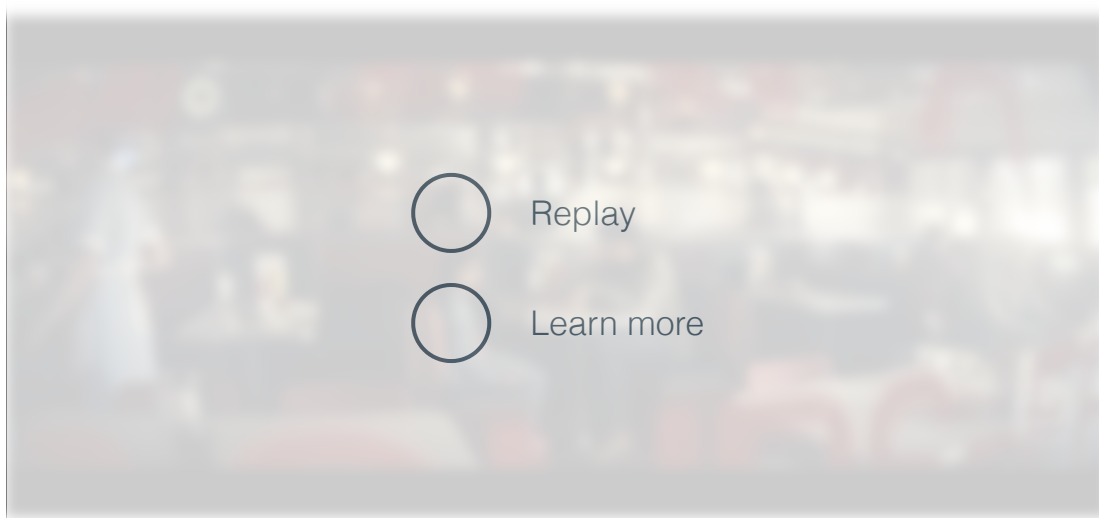
Love himself identifies as an HIV-positive, Afro-queer man, and the central character in his 80-minute play is his alter-ego, an HIV-positive gay Black male playwright who's planning to write a script about his experience. That self-referential nod is just one of many fascinating aspects of this funny, interesting and unusual play.

Reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential drama "No Exit," about three characters trapped for eternity in a purgatorial waiting room, "One in Two" also takes place in a sterile white-walled waiting room designed by Victoria Petrovich. Three Black gay men take a number and wait their turn to re-enact for the audience their life-and-death battle with HIV/AIDS. On the wall, a digital clock ticks constantly upward, no doubt registering the escalating diagnoses among this population (in 2018, there were 9,712 new diagnoses in this community, or 26 percent of the national total).



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Durwood Murray, left, and Carter Piggee in Diversionary Theatre's "One in Two." (Simpatika)

But on this day, one of these three nameless men decides to break the routine. In true Brechtian fashion, he breaks the fourth wall to ask the audience by a show of applause to decide who will go first in telling their story, which the other two men will support by playing different characters in the first man's life. On opening night, it was actor Carter Piggee who was chosen to play the central role.

Piggee and his co-stars, Durwood Murray and Kevane La'Marr Coleman, are trained to play all three characters, so audiences could see a different show every night, depending on their applause. The randomness of who will be chosen is a good representation of the toss-of-the-dice danger the virus represents to this community. All three men are so

good in the roles that on opening night, it's hard to imagine any better fit. But

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assistant director Frankie Alicea-Ford, no doubt any arrangement of the excellent actors would work well.

The story begins with the main character, Donté, learning of his diagnosis. He falls into a depression, heavy drinking, irresponsible behavior and suicidal thoughts. Years slide by before he finds some peace and community in the company of other gay Black men living with HIV. As one nurse character tells Donté of his emotional struggle: “sometimes the hurt is a bigger virus than the HIV.”



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The play travels back to childhood sexual awakening and then forward through relationships with friends, family and lovers, with lots of tension-breaking humor sprinkled throughout.

Piggee had a youthful, impulsive energy as Man No. 1, who played Donté on opening night. Coleman had grace, sass and fierce stage presence playing a flamboyant man with HIV and Donté's mother, who loves him deeply but doesn't want anyone in their family circle to know about his sexuality. And Murray has a warm, gentle presence, playing both a married man with HIV and Donté's “kinda ex-boyfriend.”

The play is best suited for an adult audience, with raw language, talk about suicide and a scene of sexuality and simulated nudity. Turner Sonneberg's direction doesn't shy away from the honesty of its adult situations, but she finds the heart of these characters and

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## ‘One in Two’

**When:** 7 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays. Through Oct. 24.

**Where:** Diversionary Theatre, 4545 Park Blvd., No. 101, University Heights

**COVID policy:** Proof of full vaccination or negative COVID PCR test result within 72 hours of show. Masks required indoors.

**Tickets:** \$15 to \$50

**Phone:** (619) 220-0097

**Online:** [diversionary.org](http://diversionary.org)

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