

Radiant talent

Artist Keith Haring's sexy, successful, and too-short life is celebrated in a new musical **By Michael Giltz**

After every performance of the new musical *Radiant Baby* at the Public Theater in New York City, you can be certain to find people in the lobby who claim a link to the late artist Keith Haring.

"Every day after the show," says actor Daniel Reichard, who plays Haring, "I meet people who say, 'I met him; I knew him; I hung out with him.' Everybody was Keith Haring's friend."

That's one reason director George C. Wolfe, the acclaimed producer of the Public, has joked to the press, "I was probably the only gay man in New York in the '80s who never met or slept with him."

Reminded of the quip, Wolfe laughs

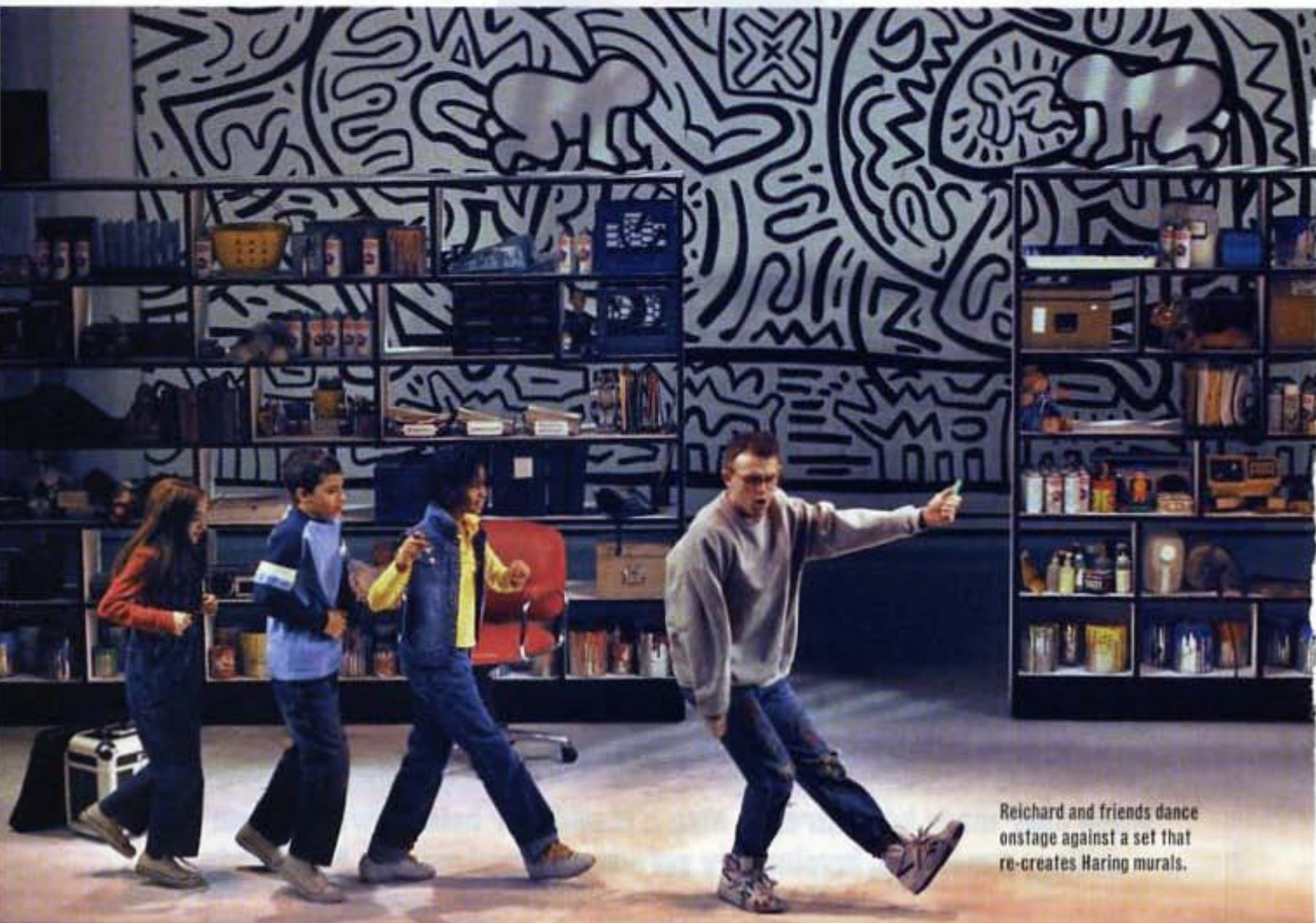
and says, "Maybe it's true; maybe it's not. I think I would have remembered."

In the show Haring's active sex life is represented by just one boyfriend, Carlos, although the song that introduces him amusingly alludes to the rest: "And that's Keith's lover / Keith had a few / But we only have so much time / So we'll just deal with one."

What is front and center is Haring's talent. A graffiti artist who made headlines when he was arrested for his subway art, Haring exploded in the '80s. His signature style became immediately identifiable and—in the grand tradition of pop culture—Haring was celebrated and then quickly torn down for becom-

ing too successful and too omnipresent. Diagnosed with AIDS at age 30, he was dead at 31. Now, 13 years later, Haring is a bigger star than ever. *Radiant Baby* tells this story against a stage backdrop like a blank canvas that comes alive with projections of Haring's swirling, distinctive, radiant art.

The musical's book, by Stuart Ross, begins in 1988 with Haring panicking after realizing he has AIDS. It flashes back to his boyhood, when Haring played with a Ken doll and was constantly drawing, peaks with a celebration of New York in the late '70s and early '80s called "New York Makes Me," and then finds Haring bursting



Reichard and friends dance onstage against a set that re-creates Haring murals.

with projects in the brief time left to him.

"What I loved about Keith," says Wolfe, "is that this person found freedom in all these different versions of New York. In the art world, in [the dance club] Paradise Garage, and the black and Latin world. He could go to Chelsea, he could go to Paradise Garage, and he could be painting a mural up in Harlem."

For Reichard, 24, whose biggest previous credits include a regional production of *Brigadoon* and the 20th anniversary version of *Forbidden Broadway*, playing the lead in a musical at the Public is a dream as extravagant as those that propelled Haring's move to New York. Reichard bears a striking resemblance to Haring—but Wolfe says he cast Reichard for subtler reasons.

"There are certain things you can't act," says Wolfe, whose many credits include *Angels in America*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, and *Topdog/Underdog*. "And there's a certain kind of geek charm—which Daniel would be horrified that I attribute to him because he's Mr. Established New Yorker now. But there's a certain geeky, awkward, charming appeal and intelligence that he has, which I thought was very, very right."

That's not to say that finding the spirit of Haring didn't involve a lot of work. "George pushed me so hard during rehearsals," says Reichard, who grew up in Ohio and attended an all-boys Catholic high school. "It was never-ending. But he's different with every single actor. He's very aggressive, very specific, and very intense. It was very frustrating a lot of times when he was pushing me and pushing me. I just wanted to say, 'Leave me alone! Get away from me. Let me figure this out.' But he wouldn't. He kept pushing me to do better work."

One day Wolfe gave notes to Reichard during his lunch break, making the actor feel especially overwhelmed. Per-



The real Keith Haring (above)—13 years after his death, he's hotter than ever.

haps coincidentally, that was the very feeling he would need to convey when tackling a major scene that afternoon.

"I was frustrated and upset and was so angry with him," says Reichard. "Then we came in and did the scene in the second act where I start having the breakdown. And all that frustration and all that anger and that feeling of being pulled in so many directions was so in me. I went crazy. I was possessed. I was uncontrollably crying. Afterward, the stage manager came up to me and said, 'Are you OK?' Because I was literally losing it. But it was exciting."

Just as exciting for Wolfe was reliving the heady days of New York in the early '80s, when a Disney Store in Times Square and a Gap on every corner seemed an impossibility.

"It was pretty severe," laughs Wolfe, who now describes himself as neither in a relationship nor single but dating. "I think *severe* is the right word, in all

of its manifestations.

"Working on this show," Wolfe adds, "was like reactivating a decade—how people looked and how people walked and what crowds were like. Doing theater and doing art, it's always so hard. And doing it in New York, it feels especially hard. The work takes something from you, but it also gives something to you. For me, it rekindled certain memories—very sad ones but at the same time very joyful and foolish ones."

Like the thick Village People mustaches brandished by two men in the number "New York Makes Me?"

"Oh, my God!" Wolfe exclaims. "Thank God we got over that one."

As the most visible man at the Public—an institution critics love to knock as too commercial—Wolfe acknowledges that Haring and he have probably irritated the same folks from time to time.

"There are many aspects of Keith's life that I respond to," he says. "Having all your actions and decisions

scrutinized within an inch of their existence. Regardless of how rough the situation is, if you can walk through it, you end up knowing more about yourself and killing off what I like to call the psychological or emotional baby fat that is in the way of your getting to the next level of your career and your art."

There's nothing uplifting about a death as premature as Haring's. Yet *Radiant Baby's* climactic scene brings Wolfe's words to mind. As a kaleidoscope of images flashes across the stage—the work the extraordinarily prolific artist produced in the few short months AIDS gave him—one feels that if anyone ever succeeded in reducing death to a means of getting to the next artistic level, Haring did. ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.