

Gay Broadway producer shines limelight on prostate cancer

Tony Award winner for 'La Cage Aux Folles' undergoes surgery in Aventura

By PHIL LaPADULA

Barry Brown won a Tony Award for producing the 1983 hit gay Broadway show, "La Cage Aux Folles." The gay Miami Beach resident also took home a Tony for producing "Gypsy," a Broadway show that starred Tyne Daly.

Having spent a long career in theater production, Brown, 64, knows how to use his show-business contacts to raise awareness and money for a good cause. He has produced AIDS benefit shows all over the country.

Recently, Brown was diagnosed with a disease that has received little or no celebrity attention: prostate cancer. When he learned that a non-invasive medical procedure to address the problem was available in South Florida, Brown decided to shine a little limelight on a disease that is prevalent among older men.

"It just seems to me that gay men and gay press today focus on HIV and to a lesser extent hepatitis when it comes to health issues," Brown said. "But we're all just people with bodies, and what happens to straight men can just as easily happen to us. When men get older, prostate cancer becomes more prevalent."

On Dec. 7, Brown's prostate was removed by a noninvasive procedure that doctors say dramatically reduces the recovery time, bleeding and discomfort. Dr. Arnon Krongrad performed the operation at the Krongrad Institute in Aventura, Fla. Krongrad was the first to perform the procedure, called laparoscopic radical prostatectomy, in the United States seven years ago, according to the institute's website.

The procedure is performed using small puncture wounds instead of abdominal incisions, Krongrad said. He said the procedure causes "much less bleeding and pain" than a traditional radical prostatectomy. The recovery period for a traditional procedure is four to six weeks, according to Krongrad. The laparoscopic procedure cuts that down to days.

"I've had patients up and around in two or three days," Krongrad said. "On average, during the first 24 hours after the procedure my patients take two Tylenols."

Although the procedure has been around seven years, Krongrad said it is



Dr. Arnon Krongrad, left, talks with Barry Brown immediately after his prostate cancer surgery at the Krongrad Institute in Aventura, Fla.

just now starting to catch on. He said the traditional procedure still predominates because relatively few doctors are trained in the noninvasive procedure and patients are unaware of it.

Gay men should be screened for prostate cancer

Krongrad urged gay men to ask about being screened for prostate cancer when they go for blood tests. A simple blood test, called a PSA, can determine high risk for prostate problems, he said.

"Twenty years ago, gay health was synonymous with HIV/AIDS," said Krongrad, who is heterosexual. "But maybe it's time to re-examine how we think about gay health." He said since AIDS has become a chronic, treatable disease, it may be appropriate for gay men to focus more on other health threats.

Brown allowed a photographer to take pictures of him before and after the procedure. It was the first time he had starred in a production instead of working behind the scenes, he joked.

Brown said he never felt any pain, just some discomfort. He does have to have a catheter for 10 days.

"I got out of the hospital Friday," Brown said. "I could easily have gone out to dinner with my friends Sunday night."

Over the years, Brown, who currently teaches a course in musical theater at the University of Miami, has helped to raise \$15 million for HIV/AIDS, mostly through one-night benefit shows, he said.

He noted that depictions of disease and medical procedures are few in the theater and film world. Larry Kramer's AIDS play "The Normal Heart" came to mind, he said. A 1985 play called "As Is" focused on the effect that AIDS has on a group of friends living in New York City. And the play "Who's Life Is It Anyway?" focused on a sculptor who becomes a paraplegic after a car accident.

Brown said the theater pieces about disease that succeed focused on the human-interest aspects, such as the emotional toll of an affliction.

"With theater tickets going for \$100 to \$110 a pop, who's going to spend that kind of money to get a science lesson?" he asked.

Brown said he hopes his celebrity status will put a human face on prostate cancer and increase awareness of the problem among gay men.