



WHEN ANTHONY ROBERTS, ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE IN THE ST. OLAF DANCE DEPARTMENT, LOST HIS OLDER BROTHER, Tom, 43, to cancer on March 31, 2001, he allowed himself time to grieve and, slowly, to heal. The death had been shocking, coming just six weeks after Tom had gone to a doctor about back pain. Three years earlier, melanoma that showed up as a raisin-sized mole had been excised, and Tom was thought to be cancer free. A year after Tom's death, Roberts' feelings of frustration, sadness and hope were still raw. He decided to call on his art to help him heal.

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ROBERTS

Out of this struggle came *Swing a Club: facing cancer*, a powerful multimedia dance piece that illuminates themes of life and death, hope and grief, support and letting go. Two years in the making, *Swing a Club* debuted at St. Olaf in April 2004 and was reprised last November. Plans are underway to tour the piece nationally.

Roberts' deep affection for his brother inspired him to take an active role in caring for Tom and his family. He questioned Tom's treatments by a well-meaning doctor whom the family had chosen in their hometown of Johnson City, Tennessee. He grew frustrated that his brother, whose body was riddled with cancer, was obsessed with being able to swing a golf club again.

Meanwhile, Tom's wife, eight months pregnant with their first child, refused to consider any scenario that ended with her husband's death.

Throughout his multifaceted work, Roberts delves deeply into a caregiver's view of cancer while offering a loving portrait of his brother. To create the piece, Roberts choreographed dance, composed music, produced video material, wrote dramatic text and helped design sets and lighting.

"I felt I could hug Tom a little bit tighter if I did it all," he explains.

Swing a Club's achievement lies in its ability to reveal a complicated and conflicted perspective on cancer — what it takes away and who it leaves behind.

Roberts acknowledges his anger at Tom, who worked in the Social Security office in Atlanta, for brushing aside his initial diagnosis. The family's lack of preparation for the death exacerbated tensions. Yet the piece expresses closeness and empathy, too.

Dozens of friends, colleagues



PHOTOS BY ERIC SAULITIS

and audience members told Roberts that *Swing a Club* helped their own healing. “I just wanted to tell you again how moving your performance was,” St. Olaf junior Stephanie Smith wrote to Roberts. “My uncle is struggling with bone and lung cancer, and to have something like that to relate with and see was exactly what I needed.”

Roberts’ integration of several media allows “multiple points of entry,” he explains. “People are going to *get* it; it’s going to take them to their experience with cancer.”

An overarching theme of support unfolds in flowing, dynamic movements in which the performers are partners in a dance of give and take. The caregiver’s supportive role becomes conflicted in a pas de deux performed by Roberts and Heather Klopchin, an assistant professor of dance, when

In another related project, St. Olaf Professor of Art Wendell Arneson had his students express their feelings about cancer in watercolor paintings. The video and art exhibit have been shown alongside the performance of *Swing a Club*.

A website asking friends and loved ones to “connect the dots” and share their memories of Tom Roberts serves as a lasting tribute — and a way for his only child, Bethany, 3, to know him. She was born 12 days after Tom died.

REACHING OUT

After the performance, the dancers sit on the floor to discuss the piece with the audience. In their candor, they sound a common chord: “It’s been a great experience.”

Nearly every performer and technician for *Swing a Club*

DEATH

DANCER ANTHONY ROBERTS IS USING HIS ART TO HELP HIMSELF AND OTHERS — BOTH LOVED ONES AND SURVIVORS — HEAL FROM THE EMOTIONAL DEVASTATION OF CANCER.

BY ELIZABETH CHILD

Roberts abruptly casts her aside and gently pulls her back in a series of flawlessly performed spins, leaps and carries.

The narrative of Roberts’ struggle as caregiver is told through theatrical interludes with a therapist, played by Dona Werner Freeman ’80, artist-in-residence in the St. Olaf theater department. The video, projected on fragmented hanging screens, shows Tom’s childhood through happy family snapshots and home movies. These are disrupted by notes photographed from Tom’s medical chart, a verbal collage of words associated with cancer, the bleeping of a heart monitor and ventilator sighs.

Roberts also asked 27 members of the St. Olaf community to share their personal experiences with cancer, which were then used for a companion video produced with support from St. Olaf’s Office of Community Life and Diversity.

had some personal experience with cancer, though Roberts didn’t intend it that way. While he was developing the piece, he asked the dancers to interview friends or family members affected by cancer and to develop a working knowledge of the disease, learning the meaning of *melanoma* and *metastasis*. “He wanted us to know what happens to the body when you have cancer,” says dancer Eliza Larson ’05, who has several relatives and a friend in remission from cancer. “We shared tears, and we shared our own stories,” she says, “and I realize that I’ve been lucky.”

The chance to work with Roberts spurred junior Jenny Nuelk ’06 to dance in *Swing a Club*. “I wanted to do it because

LOVE & DEATH [CONTINUED ON PAGE 51]

Roberts’ modern dance choreography is at the core of Swing a Club. It is performed by Roberts and St. Olaf dance students and faculty, including, from left: Carolyn Albert ’05, Emily Schulte, Heather Klopchin, Jenny Nuelk ’06, Eliza Larson ’05, Mary Clare Zabinski ’04.



of his movement style," she says. "Once I heard about the background of the piece, I thought it was going to be a lot to handle, but also thought: 'I have to deal with it.' I have been touched and honored to be a part of another person's struggle and healing process."

Time, and repeated performances of *Swing a Club*, have given Roberts a new perspective on Tom's death. "I still get emotionally involved and connected to my brother when I perform," he says. "But I don't get into fits of rage, despair and frustration. Now I have fonder memories of Tom. I remember playing air guitar on badminton racquets listening to the Beatles."

Charles Forsberg, associate dean of fine arts at St. Olaf, believes that *Swing a Club* should be seen by a wider audience. "It's just amazing that one person came up with this idea and so effectively molded all of these avenues together — lighting, movement, music and theater. Anthony Roberts is very talented," Forsberg says.

St. Olaf alumni are stepping up to present the work. James Urie '89, manager of the Bloomington Center for the Arts in Bloomington, Minnesota, has scheduled performances at the center on March 18 and 19. "I believe that there is an audience for performance art that deals with human and social issues," he says.

Dr. Jon Hallberg '88, an assistant professor in the University of Minnesota's Medical School and Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, would like the piece performed for medical

students, who will need to empathize with caregivers as well as patients. "There is movement afoot for the creation of a medical humanities and fine arts interest group for medical students and others in health care," says Hallberg. "*Swing a Club* would be exactly the kind of thing that group would support."

Roberts also has had interest from Middlebury College in Vermont and Duke University in North Carolina, and he has been invited to perform the work in Scottsdale, Arizona, in March 2005. He hopes to take *Swing a Club* to his hometown in Tennessee, too, so that people who knew Tom can share his story. A recent grant from the Ella and Kaare Nygaard Foundation will cover part of the touring costs.

As *Swing a Club* takes its message of hope and healing to broader audiences, Roberts acknowledges that his primary motivation has changed from healing himself to healing others. "I hope it ripples outward," he says. "The responses I've received show me the power, passion and joy of the work, and the worth of sharing it." ■

Elizabeth Child, a former dancer, is a writer and communications consultant based in Northfield.

To contact Anthony Roberts about *Swing a Club*: facing cancer, call 507-646-3248 or e-mail him at awr@stolaf.edu. To see the Tom Roberts "connect the dots" website, go to: www.stolaf.edu/depts/dance/faculty/anthony/projects/connect-dots-form.html.



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