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Terminally ill artist to perform 'groundbreaking' piece about death in Winnipeg

Andrew Henderson, who has terminal cancer, will perform a piece where audience members tell him a confession, which he gets tattooed on his body, but repeats to no one and takes to his grave.



KAITLIN VITT / FOR METRO

Andrew Henderson said last year's terminal diagnosis has made him question — and break — cultural norms, which is why his fingers are manicured, his long, pointed nails painted and covered in jewels.

By: Kaitlin Vitt For Metro, Published on Tue Oct 11 2016

Andrew Henderson is challenging people to reconsider how they see death.

Twenty-eight-year-old Henderson has terminal cancer, t-cell lymphoblastic lymphoma. It's incurable. He's going through chemotherapy treatment, but he doesn't know how long he has to live.

"For me, the future doesn't exist," Henderson said in a recent interview.

"There are possibilities, but that's not real. The only real thing is that you will die, so why are we so scared of that? And why don't we talk about it?"

That's why he's creating a performance art piece that will be a ritual for his death.

During *Taking it to the Grave*, people will tell Henderson their personal confessions. They'll do it in a private way, so only he hears, but they'll still be visible to everyone else.

He will take these confessions to his grave. The confessor and Henderson will pick a symbol to represent the confession that he will get tattooed on his body live at the show.

"Tattooing is just a reminder that flesh is temporary, so this idea of tattooing my body with people's secrets isn't as much of a big deal as people say it is," he said. "I'm going to die, and my body's

going to rot, and that's where those secrets will lie.”

He's working on the project with artist Eroca Nicols. Last year, Nicols traveled to five continents to study death rituals, learning about performances of grief.



KAITLIN VITT

Henderson believes death should be about expression

Henderson believes rituals around death aren't practiced in North America. He calls death here "capitalistic" — when someone dies, they get filled with chemicals, put in an expensive box and buried deep in the ground.

But death should be about expression, he said.

"It's about people's ability to tap into their true selves and find that in the world and be able to feel at their most comfortable with who they are."

Henderson identifies as gender-queer. He grew up in Clondeboye--a 40-minute or so drive from Winnipeg--where he said there are some people who you can tell are queer, while there are others who hide it. He said his tombstone will stand to be a monument for queer people who have died.

Last year's terminal diagnosis has made him question — and break — cultural norms, he said. Today his fingers are manicured, his long, pointed nails painted and covered in jewels.

Henderson said he's found strength in death, and he wants others to do the same.

"Whatever that is — if it's spiritual, religious — find your path, but create a great relationship with (death)," he said. "When it's your turn, or it's someone you love's turn, you're much better to handle the grief that you're going to face."

Sandy Klowak, the stage manager for the piece, calls the performance and the idea around it “groundbreaking.”

“What he’s putting his energy into has just been really inspiring and amazing in how he’s sort of performing death and incorporating it into art,” Klowak said. “I’ve never seen someone do this.”

Henderson’s funeral, and his performance, will have lots of glitter, gold and red flowers. He dreams of being buried in a champagne bottle, he said, with him floating in the champagne.

He’s creating a champagne bottle out of glittery tulle for him to sit in at the show, which will be at [aceartinc.](#) on October 21 and 23.