

Artist letter written by Rod Kelly Hines for the upcoming concert: *The Secret Letter*

I know I'm not alone in feeling that the world feels particularly heavy right now. In times like these, I find myself remembering simpler days. I think of family, and of the unwavering love that shaped me. I think of my mother and grandmother, who built a nurturing environment where I was encouraged to be fully myself in a world eager to define me by surface-level categories. That kind of freedom—to never shrink or hide—isn't something every gay man experiences, especially not where I grew up.

I was very lucky, but I've long been struck by the idea that, for so many, coming out is a fraught and scary ordeal, a reckoning, a threshold one must cross. It suggests that queerness begins in secrecy, in a shadowed room of one's own, from which one must eventually emerge...if they can. And then what? A measure of freedom, perhaps. But why should anyone have to carry that burden in the first place?

And yet, such is the world we've inherited. For centuries, love that dared to exist outside society's definition of normal has been met with shame, exile, punishment, and death. How many have been forced to suppress their truest selves, their deepest desires? Who did they love, and how? Where, in a world that denied them, did they find space to express their longing? It seemed natural to seek out the voices of those who found refuge in letters—intimate, fragile, fearless records of love that could not be spoken or expressed out loud.

Letters are remarkable things. They are simultaneously private and exposed, intended for a single reader yet capable of outliving both writer and recipient. They hold secrets, confessions, and unspoken desires, love stories told in ink rather than whispers, in pages passed between trembling hands. And over time, they become proof: proof that queer love has always existed, proof that it has always been worthy of expression. The letters explored in this program—including those written by Oscar Wilde, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman—reveal not only the passion and devotion of those who wrote them but also the risks they took in doing so.

The Secret Letter is a celebration of those voices. Their words remind us that queer love is as ancient, as passionate, and as real as any other. They also remind us of the societal, religious, and legal forces that have tried to suppress it, and the ways those forces have always intersected with gender, class, and race.

And while so many of these letters were hidden away—locked in drawers, burned in fireplaces, buried under fear—they also persist. They have traveled through time to reach us, defying the forces that sought to erase them. They remind us that love, in all its forms, is defiant. And that in a world that has so often tried to silence it, love still finds a way to be heard.

Thank you for joining us for *The Secret Letter*.

Rod Kelly Hines
baritone