

BUCK UP

Gay jokester conquers life's fears with laughs

By Ryan Lee

HAVING LITTLE luck thus far in his nationwide scavenger hunt for the perfect man, gay comedian Jason Stuart heads to Atlanta looking for what he calls "a Brokeback moment."

"I want a cowboy," jokes Stuart, who confesses to having a thing for leather/levi guys. The stand-up comedian and actor brings his "Looking for Mr. Right" tour to Atlanta's Punchline Comedy Club for a four-gig weekend beginning Sept. 21.

But Stuart, who's appeared in television shows like "My Wife & Kids," "Will & Grace" and "House" among many others, knows not to get his marital hopes up too high while hopping from city to city.

"I've had boyfriends from on the road before, but none of them worked out," Stuart says. "It's hard to meet people because they meet the celebrity."

Even in the most stable settings, Stuart admits finding the right guy is complicated.

"I've had tons of boyfriends, but I am not open to having men treat me bad," Stuart says. "Most of them lie, cheat and steal — but other than that, they're great."

STUART'S JOKES HAVE LONG been tinged with defensiveness, or mocked life's annoying difficulties.

"It's all about fear," Stuart says. "I think I started doing comedy because I was afraid of other kids, and being funny was a way of fitting in."

Stuart was able to forge a comedic identity to counter his social awkwardness and a decided lack of support for his early career from his "crazy, yet lovable Jewish family."

“I was five years old before I knew my name wasn’t “stupid,”” he says.

One of his first big breaks as an actor was community theater in Los Angeles. At age 14, Stuart nabbed the lead in “Santa Claus for President,” and had an adolescent epiphany as he took the stage in a jolly fat-man suit.

“I remember I thought, “Oh, I can get people to laugh,”” he says. ““This is cool, this is something I wanted to do, and this is something I’m good at.””

Initially, Stuart hoped that his jokes would open a door for becoming an actor, and he entered Hollywood in the “The Life & Times of Eddie Roberts,” a short-lived soap opera parody in the early ‘80s.

Alongside his stand-up routines, Stuart landed small roles in everything from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s “Kindergarten Cop” to Angela Lansbury’s “Murder, She Wrote.”

The same year Stuart played a motel manager on the murder-mystery television series, the budding comedian appeared on the television show that Stuart knew would reshape his career.

But before Stuart came out as an openly gay entertainer on “The Geraldo Rivera Show” in 1993, he thought it would mark the end of his Hollywood dreams.

“I was afraid I was going to lose my whole career,” says Stuart, who faced coming out the way he does all of his fears “ with a laugh.

“My whole career changed, and suddenly I gained a lot of respect,” he says. “I think that when you’re telling the truth, it’s funnier “ comedy needs to be real.

“The critics even said I became more masculine as I came out, which I still don’t understand, but OK,” he says.

MANY PEOPLE STUART KNEW thought he was crazy when he embarked on a career as a comedian, but he attributes his success to good friends and good therapy.

In addition to helping him deal with life issues, the world of shrinks has also been good for Stuart's acting career. He counts as one of his most pleasurable productions his recurring role as the gay psychiatrist on "My Wife & Kids," where star Damon Wayans kept Stuart on the floor with his improv jokes and his killer good looks.

"I just dropped dead every time I would see him," Stuart says of Wayans.

Most recently, Stuart popped up on television shows like "George Lopez" and Kirstie Alley's "Fat Actress," as well as in movies such as the stoner flick "Puff, Puff, Pass," and the upcoming "Coffee Date," starring Wilson Cruz.

With his first stand-up comedy special, "Jason Stuart: Making It to the Middle," recently wrapped, he is currently shopping the show to cable stations and hopes to air it this fall. Meanwhile, he's fine with letting go of the hopes he once had of becoming a stunning leading man on the big screen.

"What's happened is the comedy got more successful than the acting," he says.

Even if he wanted to be an openly gay leading man, Stuart has been in the entertainment industry long enough to know it's not that simple. Still, he has no regrets about coming out on national TV, and the path his career took in the 13 years since then.

"I think when you lie about your sexuality as a gay person, you hurt a lot of people," he says. "We all have to stand up and be counted."