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A Stand-up Guy

Comedian, Actor, Activist: Why Jason Stuart Can't Commit to Just One Role

By Lydia Marcus

Jason Stuart is a self-deprecating, self-described "average gay guy" who is well-known for his dual career as an actor and stand-up comedian. What most people don't know is that Stuart also works as a lecturer who speaks to major corporations like Motorola and AT&T, as well as college students, in a very personal and revealing piece titled "Coming Out in Hollywood: Making It to the Middle-What It's Like to Be Openly Gay in the Workplace."

November saw the home-video release of "10 Attitudes," featuring Stuart in his first starring role. In the film, Stuart plays Josh, a man suddenly confronted with the dissolution of his 10-year relationship after he catches his partner with a younger man. Determined to find love again but nervous about meeting new people, he participates in a bet concocted by his optimistic best friend who's convinced that if Josh goes on 10 different dates with 10 different men, he'll find true love.

In addition to "10 Attitudes," Stuart will be traveling with his new stand-up show, "The Looking for Mr. Right Comedy Tour." He also has two additional films making the festival rounds: "Ghosts Never Sleep," co-starring Faye Dunaway, and "Letting Go," in which he portrays a man living with AIDS in 1989. He's also appearing in two original VH1 shows—as a celebrity panelist on "Love Lounge," and as an interview subject (along with k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge) on an episode of

“The Coolest Year,” in which he talks about what it was like growing up gay. As if that were not enough, he will also co-star in an episode of Kirstie Alley’s new cable comedy, “Fat Actress,” set to air next March.

I recently caught up with the busy performer by phone just days before he was set to perform his stand-up routine on a mixed gay and straight Carnival cruise. During our interview, Stuart delved into the difficulty of finding a husband, acting opposite Alley and Dunaway, his experience working on “10 Attitudes,” and much more.

Lydia Marcus: You’ve been doing a lot of sitcoms and playing a lot of gay characters lately.

Jason Stuart: Or what I call ambiguous. I’m in charge of something yet no one will listen to me. I’m always playing the manager of something, but yet no one will listen to me and I don’t why. Isn’t that weird? Yes, something about you connotes power, yet not complete power. Although when you played the marriage counselor to Damon Wayans and his wife on “My Wife and Kids,” they really listened to you.

The most powerful role [of all], yet I cured them, and it was over. Now that you get recognized from TV, do you get cruised more?

Well, that’s been going for years because of doing the stand-up. So does doing stand-up get you more dates?

In a weird kind of way, but it’s not what you think it is. So what is it?

It’s sort of that people become interested in what they think you are, not who you are. And no matter what, I’m not famous enough. Rita Hayworth used to say something like, “Men would go to bed with Gilda and they’d wake up with me,” and it wasn’t quite what they were expecting.

I don’t think the bed part is the problem; I think it’s just the life part. So what’s different about you in life versus your act?

I'm pretty quiet. I have a very quiet life.

Are you the typical shy, introverted person off-stage, but ...

I'm not shy or introverted, but I'm just not much of a social butterfly.

I'm not out at Rage every night. I'm a Faultline, Cuffs kind of guy if I go out. I don't smoke and I don't drink.

How has your stand-up evolved over the years?

What's great is, I just talk about whatever I want to talk about and I don't think about it and I don't edit myself, where[as] I used to do that all the time.

I've noticed that when you've been on TV promoting your stand-up you often flirt with the male hosts.

Oh, I do, don't I?

Yes.

Because I want to be married. Well, what is my tour called right now?

"The Looking for Mr. Right Comedy Tour." What is my movie called?

"10 Attitudes." What is the movie about? It's about how difficult it is to fall in love. "Can a regular gay guy fall in love in Los Angeles?" That's the logline for the film.

In "10 Attitudes," you go out on 10 dates with 10 guys. Were those scenes improvised or a mix of script and improv?

No, mostly improvised.

So when David Faustino is playing a character who asks you to be in a threesome with his girlfriend ...

I had no idea that was coming. Wasn't that the funniest thing you ever saw? I almost died. I had to keep myself from laughing my head off. I realized from watching your acting reel, which has clips of your lectures, that a lot of the script came from your real life.

Oh my God! Oh, you're the first person to see that correlation.

In the movie there's a flashback to you as a chubby junior high school student getting harassed by some boys because they think you're

gay, and someone scrawls “fag” on your locker. That’s something that actually happened to you.

That happened to me, yes. Lots of things from the film are taken from my life, but it certainly isn’t my life because I’m not from Ohio. I’m an L.A. boy; I grew up in Los Angeles, I was born in New York.
Do you think you’ve been interviewed by a lot of straight people?

Oh, definitely.

Are they a little freaked out, like how much they can ask about certain things?

They ask the weirdest questions. The question I get all the time is—they’re very concerned with which part is gay and which part isn’t. And I always say, “Most of the time my parts are so small there’s no time for a sexual preference.” You know, I’m in two or three scenes; it’s not like you’re going to get a whole background.
Right. They want a little flow chart.

See, the thing is, I don’t care if the part is straight or gay—I care if I’m in a good project with good people where I’m going to grow as an actor and where I can be good.

What do you hope people get from “10 Attitudes”?

Well, number one, it’s a romantic comedy about a semi-attractive, 30-something guy, so it’s not about some young twinkie, yet there are a lot of very good-looking men in the film. I call it gay Julia Roberts meets “Real World” meets Woody Allen.

You perform at a lot of mainstream comedy clubs. What do you think your appeal is to straight audiences?

I think funny is funny. And if you’re a funny person, which I am, my job as a comedian is to set up a joke so they understand it, so I have to be able to be a storyteller and not be afraid. But I was more afraid of gay guys when I first started doing comedy than I was of anything.

(laughs)

Why?

Because no matter what, there's 20 gay guys in the audience that are just as funny as you are; the only difference is they can't repeat it. ... I have to repeat it all the time at a moment's notice whenever I have to work.

You recently filmed an episode of Kirstie Alley's upcoming cable comedy. What was she like to work with?

Really nice ... What was interesting was when I took a picture of her she said, "Please take it up high because the outfit makes me look fat."

You also recently worked opposite Faye Dunaway in an independent film called "Ghosts Never Sleep." What was it like working with her?

Working with Miss Dunaway was just it for me. She was incredible. She's always in character and she basically was very, very gracious to me, and she was there for me—she was there for my close-up—and she was just fabulous.

When you aren't acting or touring with your stand-up, what do you like to do for fun?

I'm a movie nut. I really like to hike ... I like to read. I also like to draw and paint, but I haven't done it in a long time ... I'm also very political. I do a lot of political fund-raisers, benefits. I do a lot of things that I think are important to our community. That's important to me in life. Because you grew up in L.A., you used to go watch a lot of TV tapings locally at CBS next to the Farmer's Market.

Oh, God, yeah, all through grammar school and junior high and high school.

What did you see?

"Sonny and Cher," "Maude," "Carol Burnett," "All in the Family," game shows, talk shows. My first talk show ever—the first time I was ever on television—was on "The Vin Scully Show." ... I was interviewed from the audience and I said, "Oh, God, someone's going to find me, someone's going to find me and make me a star." I just really believed that. I believed that God had waved his wand over me; that's the way

I survived as a kid. And I thought that one day someone would come and give me this great part. And [what] I really want is to get a really interesting supporting role in a movie, and I want to get paid nothing for it, get an Oscar nomination, have the greatest experience of my life, and then for the next 10 years do the same roles in big studio pictures and get paid tons and tons of money. (laughs) And then play a straight guy in a movie and surprise everyone and actually win the Oscar.

For more on Stuart's new movie,
see www.ariztical.com/10attitudes.htm.

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