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A Gay Performer's Upward Spiral
Resisting the Gay Niche

By Jon Matsumoto

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Jason Stuart just can't fathom the concept of valet parking.

"You give someone you've never met, who's wearing really bad clothes, your car," says a puzzled Stuart. "What do they give you back? A piece of cardboard that says, 'If we lose your car it's not our fault.' Isn't this insane? We lock our cars; we have a Club, but the minute we see a valet we say, 'Here, take it!' "

The 32-year-old has been trying to make sense of the nonsensical world since he began doing stand-up 13 years ago. Much of his time has been spent plying the sometimes grueling national club circuit, witty observations in tow.

But it wasn't until three years ago that Stuart felt complete as both a comedian and a person. That's when he mustered up the courage to come out as an openly gay performer. Since making that decision, he says, his career has picked up considerable momentum.

Support from the gay community had been particularly strong since the Los Angeles-based comedian appeared in Comedy Central's "Out There in Hollywood" special in October. Since 1993, the cable network has presented an annual program devoted to gay and lesbian stand-up talent.

"That [special] sort of changed everything for me," he says. "Gay people are dying to hear things about themselves. A lot of the [gay] bars around the country have video nights, and apparently my set has been playing everywhere. I did Milwaukee's gay pride [event], and people were mouthing word to things I did [in the televised routine], and they gave me a standing ovation. I was so amazed."

Still, Stuart refuses to be ghettoized. He continues to perform at mainstream comedy venues, where, he says, he attracts an almost equal blend of gay and straight fans. His gay profile has merely added another dimension to his stand-up routine. Stuart still gets plenty of

mileage out of his experiences with his somewhat contentious Jewish family.

“My parents are divorced,” he reveals. “My father married a really nice gal; she’s 12. I have a sister who’s an Orthodox Jew as of four years ago. She doesn’t let me talk to her kid because she’s afraid if I look at her kid he’ll turn gay. We do have that power. I have an 87-year-old grandmother who I help take care of. She thinks everything should be free. I bought her some magazines the other day. She said, ‘Oh my God, did you pay for these?’ I said, ‘No, I got them from the doctor’s office. They’re free.’ “

Stuart’s aim is to parlay his stand-up success into a high profile acting career. “I never thought about being a comic [while growing up],” he says. “I always wanted to be an actor. I thought I was going to be the next Robert DeNiro.”

Stuart has made some strides. His TV credits include guest appearances on “Murder, She Wrote,” “The John Larroquette Show” and “seaQuest DSV.” He also landed a small role in the upcoming National Lampoon sequel “Vegas Vacation,” starring Chevy Chase. Nevertheless, Stuart expresses frustration over the limitations he says Hollywood places on openly gay actors. He says some producers won’t consider him to play straight characters, which can leave him scrambling for the few gay roles available.

But if Stuart falls short in his acting ambitions, it won’t be because he’s timid. Not long ago, a little chutzpah helped him procure a lead role in an independent film called “Gay TV: the Movie.”

“I noticed in the Hollywood Reporter that they were doing this film,” he explains. “I just sent them a press kit and said, ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this movie without me.’ They called back and said, ‘We know you; we love you. Here’s a script. Send us an acting tape.’ I sent them a tape, and they called back and said, ‘Would you like to do this movie?’ It was really bizarre. I mean, they never even met me.”

Stuart plays a producer in this film about a gay man and his straight sister, who start the first gay cable network. He equates the movie with “Hollywood Shuffle,” Robert Townsend’s 1987 comedy about black stereotypes in Hollywood. Stuart says the movie’s producers hope to get it shown in theaters at the end of the year.

Stuart might have been reluctant to take the role in “Gay TV: the Movie” when he was living in the closet. But there’s little doubt that he’s breathing a lot more freely and confidently these days.

“I went to a party recently where there were a lot of comics,” he recalls, “I brought the guy I was dating. We were walking around, and at one point we held hands. I thought, ‘My God, isn’t it neat that I can do this?’ It felt so incredibly good to be just myself. It was great that I felt I had the same rights as everyone else in the room.”