

“One on One” by Bill Zwecker
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So long, straight man

Outing has perks for Stuart

LOS ANGELES - No doubt about it, Jason Stuart is a trip - a funny voyage of wit and poignant observation that starts the minute you meet him.

Stuart prides himself on being one of the first gay comedians who has crossed over - successfully appealing to a straight audience, as well as the gay one that enthusiastically cheered him on, after the comic “came out” several years ago.

“It is funny talking about ‘crossing over,’” Stuart said. “Considering I had been working as a standup comedian for a long time before I ever came out... There sure were a lot of straight people who put bread on my table.”

But the actor and comedian makes it clear that since he told the world of his sexual orientation, he hasn’t soft-pedaled his gayness. That’s not the way to snare the continuing approval of “breeders,” as he puts it.

Even Aunt Gertrude from Duluth would have known if she had spied Stuart sauntering into the lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel here - decked out in an outfit that could have come straight from the “Stereotypical Gay Guy” section of any Hollywood studio’s wardrobe department.

With his combat boots, shorts and plaid shirt, Stuart did fit the image, but then, “So what?... These days you can’t even tell who’s gay or straight. Just look at how guys are dressing.” said Stuart, slipping into a corner booth in the hotel’s tranquil bar. “What’s considered gay today will be worn to the Dodgers games by a bunch of construction workers within two years.”

The secret to Stuart’s comic appeal comes from his ability to make jokes about homosexuals as well as heterosexuals.

Chatting about his recent drive to lose weight and get in shape – a well-known fetish among many gay men – Stuart quipped, “You have to be in shape out there (in L.A.). That’s why I’ve been pumping up. It’s part of the culture. If you have more than 10 percent body fat, they put you in a cage and you cannot come out until you get there.” The comic’s blend of jokes – “My humor is really about people, my family, the foibles of modern life” – gets its first mainstream Chicago outing when Stuart headlines at Zanies comedy club. 1548 N. Wells, Tuesday through August 16.

He’s excited about the chance to work Zanies, as his only previous Chicago appearances “were at charity events and things like that.” While his stand-up routine continues to be the main focus of his career, Stuart is working to broaden his base. “I really hope to build a life as a character actor,” he said, though he admits it’s hard for him to be considered for anything but foppish prissy roles.

“But that was true long before I ever came out. Those were the only parts I was considered for, so I thought, what’s the difference? I might as well be true to myself.”

The New York native, who was reared in Los Angeles, has long been toiling in the vineyards of Hollywood hopefuls. Though he has snared guest slots on such TV series as “The Drew Carey Show,” “Murder, She Wrote,” “Murder One” and “The John Larroquette Show.” and parts in a dozen movies (“Kindergarten Cop,” “Vegas Vacation”), Stuart is still waiting for the big break.

He’s hopeful that his first dramatic big screen role – in the yet-to-be-released “Southern Man” – may make casting directors look at him a little differently. Stuart plays a gentle teacher who mentors a boy who is physically abused by his father.

Recently, Stuart completed filming Warner Bros. “Lost and Found,” the latest vehicle for David Spade of “Saturday Night Live” and “Just Shoot Me” fame.

“I get to play a very rude jewelry salesman – I based him on Gale Gordon,” he said. Gordon co-starred with Lucille Ball and later with Eve Arden on “Our Miss Brooks.”

Stuart says his move into professional comedy wasn't something he ever had planned. "Being funny was something I developed as a kid – just like so many other comedians. Growing up I never thought of myself as funny. I just thought of myself as scared." The entertainer seems surprised when he is told he has a biting sense of humor. "I guess that is true, though I don't think of it that way," he said.

"I say things that I guess can be taken as biting – that come out before I even realize it." said Stuart. "I went to a party at my friend Suzanne's house and met her sister, who had seen me a couple of times on TV.

"Before too long, I said, 'Oh, I have to go outside for some air. There are way too many heterosexuals in this room.' ...Of course, I was kidding, but her sister looked at me quite sincerely and said, 'Don't you like straight people?' "

Stuart probably was slipping into his act.

"Of course I like straight people! If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here... plus they're half of my audience as well!"

Conversing with Jason Stuart is like jumping on a verbal roller coaster. Subjects fly by as quickly as they're raised. Within moments, the man jumped from a touching story about his grandmother Molly (who celebrates her 90th birthday on Aug. 18), to the joys of vegetable dim sum, to a rant on the evil of cigar smokers: "Look! Those jerks just stunk up this room and now they leave. Too bad it wasn't the reverse." He looks to legendary comics for inspiration.

"The people I used to love were not the stand-up comics, but the sit-down ones... As a kid, I watched tons of talk shows, where someone like Buddy Hackett, Joan Rivers, Wally Cox, Lily Tomlin, Tracey Ullman or Teri Garr would come on as guests and just talk and be funny.

"They had conversations not just with the hosts of those shows – like Johnny Carson – but through them with the audience. They were funny because they pointed out the simple foibles in everyone's life.

“Hey! That’s true whether you’re gay or straight or somewhere in-between.” said Stuart with a knowing wink.