

For Jason Stuart, His Sexual Orientation's a Full Time Job

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Actor-comedian Jason Stuart isn't the first performer to come out of the closet and announce that he's gay. He's only one of the more recent. But even though the heavy weather of persecution for sexual orientation has lifted somewhat in the '90s, his restless anxiety, his eagerness to please mixed with a wariness of being ridiculed, his sense of fun and his sense of fear, all point to the experience of being gay as a full time vigil.

There's still the potential for culture clash that can erupt in a sudden glare. There's the tough double jeopardy of maintaining one's irreducible identity in a heterosexual world while living in a performer's skin, where self esteem is treacherously vulnerable to the approval of others.

"I perceive myself differently than other people perceive me," he says. "When I was a kid, everyone thought I was jovial, funny. But I was one of those suicidal kids who went to sleep wishing I wouldn't wake up. It's very, very tiring, being in the closet. It makes you feel bad about yourself. When I don't see myself represented in movies or TV, it makes me feel there's no place for me in this world."

Stuart, 35, has been making his place since 1993, when he first decided to tell all to an audience at Houston's Laff Stop, then to the nation on "Geraldo." Later, he did his act on Broadway for the Gay Games, in "OUTrageous Comedy" with Sandra Bernhard.

As an actor, he has done a number of TV spots within the past year, on such shows as "SeaQuest," "The John Larroquette Show" and "Murder, She Wrote." On Tuesday, he brings his "I'm Out . . . Jealous?" act to the Ice House in Pasadena for National Coming Out Day.

"It's been a year and a half since I did 'Geraldo,'" Stuart muses. "The show was called 'Unconventional Comedians.' But what comedian is conventional? What are comedians but people who complain and get paid for it? I think this has made me a better person. And it may help

some other kid who's thinking of killing himself. I'm not just out for me, I'm out for everyone."

Stuart has such an outré, Auntie Mame demeanor that it's hard to picture him as ever having been repressed.

"I've lied to myself so much that I literally can't remember what went on in my life at times," he said, glancing out at the life moving along the busy street. "I guess it's part of being in denial.

□I□m easy, but I won't tell you everything. The family name is Greif. I was born in the Bronx, but my father moved us here to the Fairfax district when I was a year old. He's a self made man who started in the necktie business, a Russian immigrant without formal education who's gifted at creating something from nothing. He married my mother when they were both very young. She was blond and buxom and very beautiful, the kind of '50s woman who knew she had to get by on looks."

Stuart's parents were divorced when he was 17. He's on guardedly friendly terms with them and with his older brother, but not with his younger sister, whom he mentions in his Stand up act. She became an Orthodox Jew and had a baby I've never seen like if I hold him once he'll turn gay. I have the joke, 'What am I, Samantha on "Bewitched"?' I mean, what's the selling point? 'We have no rights and everyone hates you. Join us.'"

Being gay had no frame of reference in Stuart's early youth. "I never equated having romantic feelings for men with being a fag or queer." He paused over the anomaly of those words. "All I know is, I was this fat Jewish kid. In junior high school I was 5'9" and 250 pounds. I didn't fit in anywhere."

Hell, said Sartre, is other people. If Stuart didn't know what to make of his feelings, there were others to oblige him. "In junior high, someone scraped, very lightly, the word fag on my locker. I never told anyone, but I saw that word every day for three years."

Stuart had always felt secure acting which he began doing in junior high. But there too he was lost in the shadow of himself.

“I always wanted to be a really good actor. First I thought I was Robert De Niro; then I thought I was Richard Thomas. That’s how off I was. I was like Marlo Thomas in ‘That Girl.’ I thought all I had to do was show up and everyone would fall down. But I was still this fat Jewish kid.” He peered at the reporter’s notebook. “Don’t say ‘fat.’ I’m thin now. This is coming out in the paper. Who knows? I’m gay.” He gave a small, wry, anything-is-possible shrug.

Stuart left home at 18 and tried to launch his acting career by sending his picture to every TV show he liked and by calling every agent in the Players Directory.

“My first agent was a woman named Tina Marie who had an office in back of a wig shop. She loved me, but she never sent me out on a job.” It was just as well. Stuart knew he wasn’t anywhere near ready when, as a panicked extra on the set of “One Day at a Time,” he slammed the wrong door so hard that its molding fell off on camera. Stuart took a variety of odd jobs to support himself. “I was the world’s rudest waiter,” he recalls. “People loved it. If it was late and someone wanted a cup of coffee, I’d tell them to get it themselves. Once I threw a tray on the floor.”

In the meantime, he went to work studying under a number of prestigious acting coaches Laurence Parke, Roy London, Nina Foch, Allan Miller and Harvey Lembeck among them.

He began to find work. “The Life and Times of Eddie Roberts” was his first TV show, and “Kindergarten Cop” was his first movie. He saw in comedy a way to balance his career, and he went out on the road in ’85. In time he realized that he was sending mixed signals by playing it straight but “acting and dressing like Prince or Liberace with spiked hair. I didn’t like what I was becoming. I wasn’t telling the truth.”

A small breakthrough began when Stuart, discussing self-esteem with school kids under the aegis of a program for young artists, was heckled for being gay one day and shot back, “‘I’m not gonna let you make me feel bad for being myself.’ The teacher thanked me. I realized then that what I wanted out of life most was to be myself and to give back. I’m not the most talented or the most beautiful I’m Cher. I’ve discovered that the people who don’t know gay people are the ones who don’t like them.”

□ Stuart will appear with comedian Lynda Montgomery Tuesday at the Ice House, 24 N. Mentor St., Pasadena, (818) 577 1894. Show time, about 9 p.m. Cover charge, \$7.50. He will also appear on a roster of gay and lesbian comics during a weeklong program for National Coming Out Day, Monday Saturday at the Laugh Factory, 8001 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, (213) 656 1336. Show time, 8 p.m. Cover charge, \$8.