

## Gay revolution

UPI Arts & Entertainment – Scott’s World

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HOLLYWOOD (UPI) — Ellen Degeneres lost her new TV sitcom this year perhaps because she had the audacity to come out of the closet a few years ago.

Perhaps not.

But if her personal sexual preference was responsible for the cancellation of “The Ellen Show” this season cannot be ascertained, the blonde comedienne’s courage in acknowledging she is a lesbian has opened a new era for gay and lesbian entertainers.

Comedian Jason Stuart credits his friend Degeneres for kicking in the after-burners on his own stand-up career and roles in primetime TV playing gay characters.

Stuart, openly gay, is recurring on the weekly ABC sitcom hit “My Wife and Kids” as well as a gay character in “Will & Grace” among other gigs.

According to Stuart, Degeneres’ outing and subsequent highly publicized love affair with actress Ann Heche is a landmark in the acceptance of homosexuals throughout show business.

“It’s been a long road (for gay performers),” the personable Stuart said this week, “but it’s been wonderful. I’m overwhelmed.

“Ellen coming out changed everything. She made it okay. She changed television.

“I get down on my knees every day and thank God for her.

“When she came out I did 10 shows in a row: ‘Drew Carey,’ ‘Providence,’ ‘Three Sisters,’ ‘The Huntress,’ ‘Charmed,’ ‘Norm’ and several independent films and a picture, ‘Vegas Vacation,’ with Chevy Chase.

“I was able to work. Before Ellen’s stand I would get one TV role a year and do my standup act.

“I’ve done probably 20 things in the last couple of years. Ellen has lifted the wire for gay performers, which includes playing gay characters.”

Stuart said it took a great deal of courage on the part of Degeneres, saying it is just as difficult for lesbians to come out as it is for gay men.

“In some respects being a gay woman is not as threatening as being a gay man,” he said.

“It’s different. In ‘My Wife and Kids’ I play an empowered shrink. I’m an openly gay man playing an openly gay shrink who has a husband in the show and is out to help this straight couple.

“It’s the top show on ABC right now. It won the People’s Choice award for best sitcom. It stars Damon Wayans.”

Stuart grinned and said, “Reporters often ask me if my part is gay, meaning if I’m playing the same gay character all the time.

“There are as many types of gays as there are straights. My shrink is the sweetest, nicest man who only wants to help this couple.

“The funny thing about him is he can’t help talking about his own relationships, which is so inappropriate in therapy.”

Stuart says he is content with being gay, adding, “If I were straight I’d have had an easier life, but then I wouldn’t be who I am.

“In the gay press they call me ‘Joe gay guy.’ I’m not masculine and I’m not feminine; I’m just a regular gay guy. Everybody has a different perception.

“The straight world thinks gay people are funny just because we’re different. The way Jews were funny in the Catskills and black people did comedy in days past. Because they were different.

“Until we all become homogenized it apparently will continue.”

Stuart ordered lunch and observed, “It’s been an incredible year for me. A great deal of work.”

He doesn’t think he would have been as successful if he hadn’t come out.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I think it’s more important to me to be an openly gay man than to be a success. When I made that choice in 1993 to come out on the Geraldo show it was difficult but I did it.

“When I was in my 20s at auditions people basically dismissed me because I didn’t want anybody to think I was gay.

“It was sort of like I was Charles Nelson Reilly or Paul Lynde, the prototype of a type of comedy. That doesn’t exist anymore.

“But this is 2002 and people aren’t afraid to say they’re gay in real life.

“TV is catching up with real life. I’ve been touring the country for almost 10 years doing openly gay comedy and people are much more accepting than they’ve been in Hollywood and New York.”

Stuart’s success story includes a CD comedy record titled “Gay Comedy Without a Dress.”

His CD like his standup act appeals to cross-over audiences. Some of his material is gay, some is straight, as are his audiences.

It isn’t necessary for Stuart to dress in drag and camp it up a la Milton Berle and other straights who played gays for laughs.

Stuart is man enough to take chances and sensitive enough to keep his act screamingly funny without becoming bawdy.