

In the middle of two worlds

Jason Stuart, an edgy gay comic and actor, is out and successful in Hollywood

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In the middle of his career, Jason Stuart, an openly gay Hollywood actor and stand-up comic, finds himself on the fairly stable ground ? especially for being in show business.

“I will always work,” he says. “I will always be a sought-after character actor.”

Currently, he’s scored a TV special on Here! TV’s video-on-demand service. His show, “Jason Stuart: Making it to the Middle,” runs through April 24 and features an hour of edgy, gay stand-up comedy. The show was filmed before a live, largely straight audience in Columbus, Ohio.

“I love straight people,” Stuart says. “Two of them clean my house. One of them stole something, but I’m not saying anything.”

During his set, Stuart flirts mercilessly with “Buck,” a handsome young man sitting in the front row with his girlfriend.

When asked if he was afraid of any backlash from the straight couple, Stuart jokes, “Buck and I have been dating for a month.”

Despite the laughter, this openness is a far cry from where the comedy industry used to be, and Stuart acknowledges the strides made by Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O’Donnell as being essential to his own coming-out process in the entertainment world.

“I remember sitting in a hotel room in St. Louis, watching Ellen on Rosie’s show,” he says. “Ellen joked about being Lebanese. ‘Some people think I’m Lebanese, too,’ said Rosie. I realized it was OK for me

to be me,” says Stuart, adding that Lea Delaria, Funny Gay Males, Kate Clinton, Bruce Vilanch and Suzanne Westenhoefer were also role models. “They gave me a crack of light. Before them it never occurred to me that I could be out.”

Not knowing what an openly gay life could look like possibly comes from his family life experiences. A self-described weekend Jew, the performer shared that his Orthodox sister won’t talk to him, and he hasn’t met any of her four children.

MILES AWAY FROM that world now, Stuart wears several hats. He’s been seen on episodic television (including “Will & Grace,” “Everybody Hates Chris” and “Charmed”), appeared in feature films (including “Kindergarten Cop”), and he’s worked as a stand-up headliner.

“I’m the first openly gay comic to headline all week, not just on gay night,” he says.

Now that he’s achieved some success in Hollywood, Stuart says something not normally heard from gay people in entertainment.

“It’s more important to me to be gay than to be in show business.”

Fortunately, he doesn’t have to choose. In addition to his career, Stuart is chair of the Screen Actors Guild’s first-ever LGBT Committee, and he also chairs comedy shows for Lifeworks Mentoring, which helps to mentor gay and transgender youth.

“If I had this when I was a kid, my life would be different,” says Stuart. “I’d have self esteem. With all the hate crimes being done to gay youth these days, they need our support more than ever.”

Stuart has a Lifeworks benefit show on Monday, April 14, in Los Angeles, and he’ll perform alongside Alec Mapa, Wendy Liebman, Westenhoefer and Vilanch. Chad Allen hosts the evening.

Aside from his gay advocacy work and comedy routines, Stuart hopes to branch out into richer acting roles.

“I want a career that mirrors Steve Buscemi, John Ritter, Philip Seymour Hoffman. I want to do more acting. Now, it’s OK for me to not be me. I don’t have to play the funny gay guy or the guy dying of AIDS, I can play a doctor or a priest. I want to open doors for others.

“We’re coming of age. By interviewing me, you’re supporting me and my work. By granting you the interview, I’m supporting you and your work. We’re supporting each other, as gay men should.”