Dancer from the Dance

HIV positive for more than a decade, model/dancer/circuit party boy Thom Collins lives fast and plays faster.

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From New York City to Palm Springs to Atlanta to Fire Island to Los Angeles to Miami. A-list queens follow the gay porn circuit—and *nobody* talks about AIDS. A few beauties disappear from the circuit every year and there's quiet speculation about where they might have gone, but the party goes on. Nobody talks about AIDS. Until now. HIV positive for more than a decade, model/dancer/circuit party boy Thom Collins lives fast and plays faster. So, pull on your boots, take off your shirt and get ready to dance.

He's impossible to miss. He danced atop risers all over sunny Palm Springs last Easter weekend. He danced on a stage overlooking the Hudson River at the climax of Stonewall 25. Now he's dancing atop two speakers blaring out across Vizcaya at The White Party on the last day of Thanksgiving weekend in Miami. He's big. He's handsome. His body's lovely. He's in drag.

Lots of guys think Thom Collins is the life of the circuit party. They cheer his mock-intense, neck-snapping frenzy, giggle as they get smacked in the head by a furious flap of crinoline, stare at his crotch because of tales they've heard or *Playgirl* photos they've seen. They circle this amalgam of twisted beauty thinking the same thing as Vegas tourists who cruise Siegfried and Roy's white tigers—they'd love to feel them but would never have the nerve to ride one. Now, consider how it feels to be on the receiving end of all that attention from these celebrants, many of whom are staring from the bottom of a K-hole. It's all the encouragement Thom Collins needs to keep it up for hours.

There are also a lot of guys who wish Thom Collins would just go away. They've seen it, they're over it. He's ruined it. He's too loud, he's too much, he's relentless. When Collins is on South Beach earlier in the day, wearing the swatch of neon green that was perfect two years ago when he modeled swimsuits for *International Male*, he prances by a cluster of Pump Boys who try to separate the torso from the toy Kewpie doll Collins has perched on his shoulders, its arms wrapped round his neck, as if ready for a chicken fight with Barbie. "Why does he do that?" asks a buffette from Atlanta. "I'd jump on his bones and get lost in that butt in a heartbeat. But that doll, that pose. Girl, *please*." His equally height-challenged and pumped sister from Chicago is slightly more charitable. "You know, the doll comes off; the ass is permanent." "It's a package," the buffette insists. "But too many moving parts. Who could keep up?"

Baby, you don't know. Thom Collins idles at higher rpms than you can rev to in fourth, though not necessarily for the usual reasons. While thousands of oglers and ignorers are blithely following the bouncing mirrored ball to whatever city it takes them to, this dancer is finally on a long-desired mission of self-discovery, and nobody knows better than he that he's had a late start. Which is why both onstage and off, Collins is dancing as fast as he can.

Take all the soap plots broadcast during a month of daytime TV and imagine them all pleayed out by the same cast. We don't have the room, Aaron Spelling doesn't have the room, even if FOX TV gave him all the holes in their prime-time schedule they couldn't do Collins' life justice. So we offer these teasers from Thom's life according to Thom, until the rights are sold for syndication.

Get ready for Thom as his Oklahoma City high school's first male cheerleader; being branded "pecker checker" by fellow members of the swim team; stripping in straight clubs and giving mom his take-home pay in singles; being thrown out of the house when the folks trash his room and discover *The Joy of Gay Sex*; quitting high school after making the front page of the local paper stripping in his school mascot's costume ("I was going to return it"); meeting David, the married, father-of-three, pillar-of-the-community, cocaine-addicted, once and future lover while performing; getting raped at gunpoint and David laughing about it; laughing when David gets robbed and beaten at gunpoint two days later; being dropped by David after the latter confesses to his pregnant wife he's gay; falling in love with Tommy; going back to David when he offers to set him up and keep him; living with Mindy the transvestite (who later will sell a tape of Thom and friends cavorting naked to David's wife during divorce proceedings for the promise of a sex change); throwing his mother out when, after threatening to have David picked up on sodomy-with-a-minor charges, she tells David her son is using him; dancing around the world with the Chippendales, Male Factory and Mantasia; coming home to find David's drug problem worse; going to hairdressing school; going to LA to become a model and actor; taking a shower after watching *An Early Frost* and finding a possible KS lesion; hearing the good news—it's not a lesion, and the bad news—he's HIV positive; having David freak; learning David seroconverts to positive; having two nose jobs, one chin job, one cheek job, one lip job; losing the *International Male* gig for doing drag (the catalog company denies even knowing of it); getting addicted to drugs and alcohol; getting sober; getting hooked; breaking up with David who's become an IV drug user; attempting suicide; watching David get sober; getting sober; going to counseling; moving back to Oklahoma City; and setting up the first of what he hopes will be a series of Open Your Heart Foundation. Thom Collins is 28.

He is honest, shame-free and immensely likeable. Being forced to have oral sex at age eight at an older friend's house is recalled with the same Fireside Theater-brand detached good humor ("I remember how disgusted I was after it was over, and then the more I thought about it, it was Hey, that's kind of fun. I started going over to the house quite a bit") that he uses to recall fatefully meeting David ("I was 16. He was 31. I walked up to him full of attitude and introduced myself as Mr. Gay Oklahoma City, which I was. He said his name was John. I said we needed to go out.") He certainly doesn't look like the ten-miles-of-bad-road-on-a-wet-night life he's led.

What's more striking, however—and it doesn't really hit you until after you've retreated from such

spriteliness (the more suspicious would ask for a urine sample)—is how he is almost completely devoid of either bitterness or neediness. Book smart he's not, but his eyes are wide open and focused. Walking along the beach he clocks each comment, acknowledges every glance (except the recurrent ones from behind). He knows the response is different without the doll. But he likes the doll. "I used to run around the beach in a girl's swimsuit. I enjoy it. Guys in pinstripes run to leather and cowboy drag. Why should I be condemned for getting off on camp and gender-fucking? I don't live in drag. I'm not trying to be a woman. Just a clown. People get too serious about image. And they think that because I have muscles or they think I'm handsome that it's my responsibility to represent the community in a certain acceptable way. Well, I don't think so."

"I'm more interested in having fun than pretending to be masculine. If I'm guilty of anything, it's being good-natured and not political. But if I can live with ACT UP spraying blood on cathedrals, they should be able to live with me. I don't stop them. God knows how long I'm going to be here, but while I am, someone has to be in charge of entertainment."

Collins sees his as a seriously underrated service. "I have spoken out, been written-up in magazines, given speeches at AIDS marches about being HIV positive for 11 fucking years. And I'm still here. I still look good. I am sick of the public's perception that HIV and death are synonymous, and I don't just mean straight people. Gays do it, too. They say at rallies that we're a community, but it's not true. It's a lot different for those of us who are positive. I'm amazed at what people think when they meet me. But I'm healthy. And I'm smiling. I see drag and HIV as related because neither one is anything to be closemouthed about. I had my own float in the last LA gay pride parade, Thom Collins and His T-Cells—boas and bubbles and me shouting "get tested." No one is going to tell me that humor and laughter don't increase those T-cells. If that sounds naive, maybe I am, but I'm not doing this solely for the attention. I'm loud because I want everyone to know that HIV is not about isolation. You shouldn't feel like you're alone. It's easy to do so when the compassion level of so many doctors in New York and LA has been beaten down by overload. And because so many of our friends would rather do anything than talk about it. Here's a weekend centered around an AIDS benefit [Miami's White Party] and I've never seen so many people so fucked up in my life. Even queens that don't do drugs will do them here just to fit in. Misery loves company. Ever notice how when you're out with a druggie and you get a grip and want to go home, they will do anything in their power to make you stay?"

Collins speaks without pulpit-preaching or finger-wagging. "I'm not about to trade one addiction for another, and be one of those queens who goes to AA three times a day and then sermonettes to death. I've led the parade too many times. I was in the bottom of the Probe when the earthquake hit LA—in a K-hole. Try to walk in a K-hole during an earthquake." But those out partying can sympathize with stumbling. Peers are not as generous when encountering sobriety. "Everyone feels guilty about doing drugs. So if you don't, people get paranois about you judging them. At Stonewall [25 in New York City], I was sober, so I went around going, 'Girl, I'm so fucked up. This hit of X is so good.' You have to. They don't want to know, unless, of course they need a ride to the drug dealer. Then, boy you are handy."

Collins believes that unsafe sex is inevitable on drugs. "We all swear it won't happen but it will.

You want to get fucked up and that's the end of it. It sure ain't about sharing." And if it's not about sharing, who's going to talk about his HIV status? "I don't want to open my soul to someone I've just met," says Thom. "I know this sounds old-fashioned, coming from me no less, but if you seriously want a relationship, and you feel the pressure of HIV, then date this person, kiss this person, get to know this person, then tell him. If he feels you were leading him on, then he's too lacking in compassion to see anything from anyone's side but his own. It's not easy to spit that sentence out. You don't need anyone who doesn't respect how tough it is."

If he's become so smart, why did he try to off himself? "You always hear comedians are the most unhappy people. I think I fit that mold. I have a very disturbed personality. And my life is so tied up with David that when we broke up, as much as I couldn't stand by and watch his addictions, I couldn't live without him. Look at this beach, full of pumped-up and brilliant 23 year olds who may meet the right person. But self-centeredness is inbred into beauty. So if problems arise? Move onto the next. "I'm sure he wants me."

"Some day they're going to remember everyone they've passed up because it was too much work. I've asked some of these guys how many relationships they've been in. 'Oh, four, five,' they tell me. Over how long? 'Two years.' They haven't been in any relationship. David and I have had a stormy one for 11 years. But between the good and the bad times it's exciting to make things work again. If someone accepts you for being positive and they're willing to deal with you, and care for you, then darling, wake up and smell the coffee and start working with them. Don't give up."

For those not so fortunate, Collins has set up the first Open Your Heart Foundation in Oklahoma City, where he and David have moved back. [They're planning a South Beach branch as well.] "We're starting small. Taking people to movies, drag shows, buying plane tickets for mothers who can't afford to see their sons. We're not dispensing medicine, doing research or giving people a nice space to die. What we're trying to do is create an organization based on living with HIV. What I want to open is like a frat house, a residence with maid service, laundry service, a communal kitchen and living room so that PWAs can live without isolation, among people they share something with. All they need to contribute is their Social Security. I'm writing the proposal for the federal grant now, but if it doesn't come through, David and I will do the prototype in Oklahoma City ourselves. I've been very fortunate, not lucky obviously, but fortunate. I'm here after eleven years, I have a lover who I still want to be with, good doctors what accept that we still have to do things my way even if sometimes that's the wrong way. And I want to give others that choice. A chance to be happy.

Thom Collins goes on. "I used to characterize myself by saying 'I'm all Thom and no action' but I was talking about something else. Now I do think I can do this. I don't know if I'll be as good at this as I am at stripping and camping, but I'm hoping to establish a value system others can understand and learn from. Sometimes I wish I read more, or went to school more, but I'm going to do this with as much as I know, and my heart, and my back, and whatever else I can use to make this happen."

Lucky for us Thom Collins has all those moving parts.

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