Don’t Adjust Your Set

April is the coolest month: Forget Ellen...actor Michael Jeter comes out positive

August 1, 1996 By Erik Meers

Midway through his address to an AIDS symposium at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences in April, Emmy Award -- winning actor Michael Jeter (TV’s *Evening Shade*, *Sister Act 2*, *Waterworld*) pulled out a pillbox and told the stunned audience he was HIV positive: “We have lost innumerable and valuable human resources to this disease. It is my honor to be part of the television community because as the medium which has the resources and scope to reach the entire planet, we have the greatest opportunity to affect change. On behalf of all of us who deal with the thing on a daily basis, thank you for your work, your love and support. Without it, we wouldn’t be here.” Jeter’s words greatly moved the audience. “It wasn’t like an AA meeting. He just slipped it in his speech,” says conference producer Paula Kaatz. “Half the crowd was in tears.”

While Jeter’s revelation of his HIV status was the dramatic high point of the one-day conference, there was also a lively debate over how far TV should go to illustrate the ravages of AIDS. “There were many HIV positive people there pitching for TV to show how horrible the disease actually is -- that people don’t die quietly,” Kaatz says. “Others said, ’Look, people can turn off the television.’” Industry insiders explained that TV is a collaborative medium and all programs involve tremendous compromise. “Generally speaking, with network TV,” says Kaatz, a governor of the academy, “if you are able to further your aims at all, it’s a miracle.” Activists countered that the public craves Howard Stern -- like shock programming and that realistic portrayals of people with HIV would both startle and educate. It was a familiar debate for the AIDS community -- radical vs. moderate approaches -- ending with both sides understanding each other a little better, but no consensus. “We were hoping to get a bunch of communicators in a room to learn what’s happening,” Kaatz says. “Now they can pass this along through programming to a mass audience.”

Other speakers were *ER*’s Gloria Reuben, talk-show host Leeza Gibbons and Dr. Alexandra Levine, University of Southern California Medical School’s chief of oncology. Gibbons offered her interview with Aileen Getty, who’s been living with AIDS for 12 years, as an example of how AIDS-themed TV can be both a commercial and moral success. “Our hotline was flooded with people who wanted to volunteer and make donations. It was a bonus that the show got a great big old rating,” Gibbons says. “It proves that you can have it both ways. People do really care.”

Grand Illusion

To Liberace, nothing was too outrageous -- except coming out

By Michael Musto

That a fantasy creature like Liberace could even exist was so surprising it made his death seem doubly impossible. A cuddly, desexualized fop cloaked in mystery even more than rhinestones, furs and pink turkey feathers, “Lee” walked a weird tightrope, shrieking he was gay with his entire being while not once actually saying so. A star long before the Ellen/Elton age, Liberace unfortunately never broke free of the grand-piano-and-candelabra trap of his own secrets and lies.

I got to interview Lee in his fancy Trump Tower co-op and marveled as he made my doubts melt into his own glittery ambiguities. He had a nicely self-mocking sense of humor, waving brooches in your face and laughing while avoiding the deeper issue of why he happened to be wearing brooches. In fact, in the wake of the 1984 palimony suit by his ex-chauffeur (a case of pianist envy?), Lee became more closeted than ever. Asked by a journalist friend of mine, “Who do you sleep with?” he said cryptically, “Them.”

Soon after that, word got out that Lee was sick. Official reports had him suffering from anemia, a severe reaction to his yearlong watermelon diet. (I knew this was a lie because I ate crates of watermelon every day and was holding up just fine -- though Lee’s handlers claimed he ate only watermelon.) For a tireless showman who strove for a sparkly, unstoppable image at all times, letting his public know he had AIDS seemed out of the question.

This internationally loved symbol of opulence and joviality had always been a composite of willowy half-truths. Born Wladziu Valentino Liberace in a suburb of Milwaukee in 1919, Lee became a splashy icon who mixed pageantry with piano playing. A classical musician, he stayed in business with a pop-oriented act for the honky-tonk circuit. In 1939, his dual personalities merged when he discovered that audiences loved a mix of classics (“I leave out the dull parts,” he said), pop and froufrou. Blue-haired ladies especially found him adorable -- his music was classy yet accessible, his manner eccentric yet nonthreatening, and his clothes distinctly borrowable. By the ’60s, this flamboyant pixie was the world’s highest-paid performer, grossing $400,000 a week in Las Vegas.

He’d unashamedly emerge from a giant Fabergé egg or swing in on a rope, but his guileless act stopped short of any self-revelation. When a British columnist implied in 1956 that Lee was gay, he sued for libel and won hands down; much later, in 1984, he nabbed a dismissal of his ex’s lawsuit. With an angry persistence, Lee got the courts to agree that his gayness was unspeakable, and his fans went along with the denials. They acted the part of Lee’s doting, overprotective mother -- the kind who would rather not know. Lee’s generation grew up believing that homosexuality is a dangerous secret, to be indulged in with quiet discretion (admittedly not Liberace’s strongest quality). What’s more, he had AIDS in the dark ages of the epidemic: Coverups were common, despite the fact that the icon of straight matinee-idoldom, Rock Hudson, had died of AIDS with no ultimate attempt at denial two years before.

In the post-Liberace era, mercifully, the coverups didn’t stick anymore. Days after he died in the late winter of 1987, the Riverside County coroner announced that Lee’s doctors had lied about the cause of death, and that an autopsy on his already-embalmed body revealed that Lee had indeed died of AIDS. This news sent shock waves -- Lee’s HIV status, like his gayness, had been only

whispered about -- but in most accounts, his fans, ever loyal, criticized the investigation as an invasion of privacy. A bio of the pianist taken off the Liberace Home Page just last year claimed he died of heart disease and emphysema, but history reports otherwise.

The Lee I choose to remember isn't the one who felt he had to hide the truth from his adoring fans. It's the Lee who, dropping his defenses a bit, told me about a drag queen who had "a schlong down to her knees" -- a big surprise to her date. "She must have felt rejected," I lamented. There was a weighty pause, then Lee suddenly became the object of all my fantasies. "I don't think she was rejected," he said and giggled.

The Liberace Home Page: www.iquest.net/cmgww/music/liberace/liberace.html

Soul Survival

Red Hot R&B -- with Curtis Mayfield, Mary J. Blige and Monica -- makes a move

With choruses of "We Are the World" echoing in their minds, more than 35 R&B artists gathered in New York City the day after the *Grammy Awards* to record a track for the latest AIDS-fundraising album from the Red Hot Organization. Top-drawer singers including Curtis Mayfield, Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill of the Fugees and Monica pitched in on the single "Every Nation," which was specially written by prominent R&B artist R. Kelly for the album. The Hit Factory production facility donated its most expensive studio for the effort.

"We've got a pretty great song that sounds like a hit," boasts Red Hot's Brian Hanna. "Everyone was in town for the *Grammys*. It was a way of recording a huge number of people without spending a lot of money. There's a sense of camaraderie around the *Grammys*. The artists were unbelievable. Some were not feeling so well and showed up anyway." Details on which other singles will be on the final version were not available at presstime, but Red Hot promises that "some of the biggest names in the business" will be on the album when it is eventually released this fall.

Like the 10 previous Red Hot records, which include country, Latin, alternative and dance compilations, the latest R&B effort is aimed at helping a specific afflicted community. While the charities have yet to be named, organizations in communities of color that support children and families living with AIDS will receive most of the proceeds. With more than $6 million raised for various charities since its inception in 1989, Red Hot is on to something. By appealing to the public's commercial tastes and better instincts, the organization is doing through the private sector what the government might once have done. It's a philosophy that Newt Gingrich could love. Red Hot has institutionalized the celebrity beneficence that we first saw at work for an African famine in the '80s. "This is a whole new model for philanthropy," Hanna says. "It's the only thing we agree with Bob Dole on."

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