Industrial Strength

Michael Kearns may never eat lunch in Hollywood again, so hold that highchair

January 1, 1996 By Evan Forster

You may remember Michael Kearns as John-Boy Walton's collegiate brother, or in Brian De Palma's *Body Double*, or perhaps you've seen him as the priest, hooker, dancer, West Hollywood stud or hemophiliac in one of his world-renown, multiple-character plays. If not, then you might recognize his '70s modeling debut as the cover boy of Grant Tracy Saxon's book, *The Happy Hustler*. Too young for that? Maybe you know him as the only openly gay actor in the '80s. No? None of these rings a bell? You weren't in his home town of St. Louis for the annual celebration of Michael Kearns' Day? Perhaps the following will jog your memory:

In the fall of 1991, immediately following the death of actor Brad Davis from AIDS, Michael Kearns announced his HIV status on *Entertainment Tonight*, becoming the first openly HIV positive actor in Hollywood. "What is in your head?" asked one friend just after Kearns' decision to nationally come out with his HIV status. Asked the same question today, Kearns responds, "Self love, self worth and self respect."

Three years positive at the time of Brad Davis' death, Kearns realized that "if another actor had to die in a state of closeted shame, nothing had changed in the six years since Hudson's death. In spite of all the red ribbons, the "Liz Taylor" events, and all of the blah-blah about the benevolence, caring, generosity and sincerity in The Industry, nothing had changed in Hollywood. Nada!" Certainly his indictment of Hollywood wasn't what one would refer to as a prudent career move.

After his prime-time, finger-pointing foray, "unlike the closeted actor famous for his dalliance in a porno theater," Hollywood wasn't exactly clamoring for Kearns' signature on a contract.

While giving up the idea of, "being a movie star" at 28 or even 35 due to political views would not have been easy, it was just fine at 41, when the only roles offered were dying, HIV-impacted persons in wheelchairs. "Having lesions applied to my face in a makeup room was a little too *Twilight Zone*-y, even if I was the first openly gay, openly HIV positive person to appear in a prime time television role [*Life Goes On*, 1992]. By then, I knew I certainly didn't need the television and film industry to provide me with a venue to act in," says a man who has more than carved a permanent venue for himself on the stage.

By 1989 Kearns was proving his expertise as writer-performer-director-producer with his award-winning, solo performance of a dozen PWAs in *Intimacies* and then again in '91 in *More Intimacies*.

In 1993, Kearns won a Drama-Logue and a Robby Award for his performance in Charles Ludlam's *Camille* and was nominated by the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle for Lead Performance. "No one's ever said I can't act" -- an understatement, you'll agree, if you're fortunate enough to see him this winter on either coast in his latest solo theater production, *Attachments*, an autobiographical piece that spans childhood to fatherhood.

Fatherhood? In 1992, following the death of his lover, Philip, Kearns' lawyer mentioned that he was in the midst of adopting. The words "I want to adopt a baby" jumped right through Kearns' lips. "Once I said it out loud, it was like saying I'm gay on national TV. I couldn't take it back."

A roller coaster ride is how you might describe the next eight months. Preliminary interviews on the phone. Psychological interviews in person. Three separate agencies, including PACT, the conduit agency in San Francisco which places hard-to-adopt babies ("read: ethnically diverse") with even harder-to-become candidates ("read: gay"); Vista Del Mar, the local adoption agency in LA; and finally the birth-mother's agency in Texas. At no time did anyone one ask if Kearns was HIV positive, nor could they according to the Americans With Disabilities Act. Eventually, Kearns was matched with an African-American woman in Dallas.

Thousands of dollars spent on the pregnancy and one week prior to the due date, Kearns received a phone call from a hopeful, gay father-to-be. "Welcome to the Gay Daddy Boom," he remembers the cheerful prospective saying. "My lover and I are thinking of adopting. What agency are you with?" With that Kearns and his mouth launched into the details of his entire case.

At exactly nine the following morning PACT phoned to inform him that they had received an anonymous message revealing Kearns' HIV status. "What is in your head?" asked all three agencies whose dream-team of lawyers followed up with a host of questions like, "When exactly do you think you'll die?"

Unable to give a precise date, Kearns' fundamental response to these and many other shaming questions is best proclaimed in his upcoming play, *Attachments*: "You analyzed me, you interviewed me, you put me under a microscope and you approved me.

Have you forgotten what's good about me now that you know I'm HIV positive?"

Technically, there was nothing any of the agencies could legally do to prevent the adoption; however, just after giving birth, the mother -- discovered to be scamming several different gay men at the same time -- refused to relinquish the baby.

Instead he has become a foster parent to Tia, an angelic, 14-month-old African-American child. Realizing that his time with the baby could be limited for any number of reasons -- including "a system that favors drug-addicted birth mothers to single gay men;" his health, which he feels the baby has only served to bolster; or even his death -- Kearns devotes nearly all of his energy to Tia. On his off hours -- as if parents have any -- he deftly manages to keep up his career as the writer-actor-director and now, as the recently published author of *T-cells & Sympathy*, a collection of 34 monologues in the age of AIDS. As for the near future, what's in his head? Don't worry, Hollywood. Kearns is too preoccupied with diapers, bottles and baby dolls to make any talk show appearances

-- at least until Tia enters pre-school. Then he’ll have mornings off.

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