It Pays To Advertise

Advertising serostatus lifts Lee Mathis' acting career

December 1, 1994 By Casey Davidson

"Healthy, HIV positive actor needs $3,500 worth of SAG work by Dec. 31 to maintain his health insurance." That was the ad Lee Mathis placed in the trade magazine Variety a year ago which, in the nation's first blush of flirtation with the idea of universal health coverage, led to a *Los Angeles Times* feature article about his predicament.

The combination of the ad and the story sparked just enough interest in Mathis' acting career for the 42-year-old former dancer to meet his goal and preserve his Screen Actor's Guild (SAG) health insurance. Accustomed to law and order roles, he spent a couple of days playing a detective on TV's *Lois & Clark*, returned to the set of the action film *Open Fire* for some pick-up work and spent a week as a jailer in another feature, *Murder in the First*. Beyond the immediate career boost and the desperately needed financial benefits, Mathis found that coming out about his HIV status and feeling the public support which followed it was a "very liberating experience."

Liberation might be the ultimate goal of Mathis' life with HIV. He frames his struggle with the virus in the no-nonsense terminology of a military campaign. "I am a member of a support group. We take care of each other, and it's very unsentimental. We're like soldiers in a war zone. We've defined a three-point strategy." The plan is physical, spiritual and supplemental. For Mathis the most basic elements of the plan are sticking to his workout schedule, chanting for an hour a day and regularly visiting an acupuncturist.

And he works. A year after the ad, the connections Mathis made continue to bring him roles. He's been able to branch out slightly (ever so slightly) from his usual casting as cop or robber: Playing a paramedic on HBO's *Dream On* and a fighter pilot on the syndicated sci-fi series *Babylon 5*.

The year did bring one significant role which didn't involve a weapon or a uniform. In June, he appeared on *General Hospital* as an HIV positive gay man, which is (gasp!) exactly what he is in real life. Admittedly, it wasn't much of a stretch for the veteran character actor, but never before has a person who is gay and positive played one on the soaps. Mathis characterizes his experience taping the show favorably but is slightly exasperated that it's taken this long for the soaps to include HIV. "It's a show called *Hospital*. This is the '90s. AIDS is a prevalent issue," says Mathis. His role was supposed to be recurring; however, he notes "they haven't elected to do it yet."

Other milestones pass and the universe continues to be uncommunicative. Positive and asymptomatic for nine years, recently Mathis' T-cell count dropped below 200, reclassifying him as having full-blown AIDS.

But Mathis does not expect a revelation. When he describes HIV as "a wolf at the door with some nasty initials," he hastens to add "but everyone's got something like that in their lives."

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