Michael Jeter Takes on Hollywood

The star of Evening Shade throws a little--on Tinseltown wannabes, media gossip-mongers, gay moralists and his own troubled path to happiness-at-last

January 1, 1998 By Peter Kurth

Standing on the sidewalk outside the Hudson Guild Theater on Santa Monica Boulevard, on a balmy summer night in the heart of Hollywood, Michael Jeter doesn't notice the single white egg that comes whizzing out of a passing car, smashes against a parking meter and splatters on the ground near his feet. If he had, he'd probably have burst out laughing. This is a Tony award-winning actor, former costar Burt Reynolds on the television's *Evening Shade* and recently famous AIDS activist who once considered giving up acting to become a mortician.

"I'd hit a dry spell in my career in the mid-1980s." Jeter explains. "I come from a family of healthcare professionals, but I was too old for med school, so I thought about enrolling in the McAllister School of Embalming." His eyes brightened and his face crinkles when he pictures the future he narrowly missed. "Just think," he says, "for $5000 I could have been an undertaker. *Limousines*! *Lights*! *Costumes*! *Emotions*! People are always emoting at funerals. I thought, 'Why not?'"

We are chattering in the open air amid a cluster of Jeter's friends and fans, a handful of journalists and the usual assortment of Hollywood wannabes who'll flock to any kind of celebrity events, even if it costs about a couple of hundred dollars to attend. Twenty minutes earlier, Jeter and the rest of an all-star cast that included Chad Allen, Greg Louganis, Steve Tyler and Bruce Villanch had received standing ovations for their benefit reading of Mark Crowley's homosexual classic, *The Boys in the Band* – this being a 30th-anniversary commemorative performance to raise money for the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. To say that this is a "gay" event doesn't begin to describe it. It's ultra-gay, super-gay, Hollywood-gay. That might have its own bearing on the sudden appearance of a flying egg: Santa Monica Boulevard is fairly crawling tonight with exfoliated faces, pumped-up pectorals, hundred-dollar t-shirts and out-of-work actors. The atmosphere tonight is so thick with ambition and self-conscious posing I'm surprised not to see 8-by-10 glossies pinned to all those Versace jackets.

Alone in the crowd, Michael Jeter stands out, not just because he's quickly been surrounded by a ring of admirers, but because he's dressed in a plain white shirt and shorts; because he wears glasses for practical and not cosmetic reasons; and because he's deeply, profoundly relaxed—physically, mentally and, I later discover, spiritually. At 44, Jeter looks much as he did at

34 and, for all I know, at 24. He is short, slight, wiry and bald, with a comedian's malleable face that is sometimes when you don't expect it, extraordinarily handsome. He laughs easily, talks happily and has a kind of coiled-spring energy that keeps him in motion even when he's standing still—twisting, turning, hugging himself, bending at the knees, waving his hands in the air and tossing a head of imaginary locks as if he were Cindy Crawford. Or, more appropriately to his sense of humor, Rula Lenska, endlessly showing her American friends around London.

"I think you'll find me easy to be around," Jeter told me earlier. I do. He has a natural friendliness and a compelling charm that's served him especially well onstage tonight. Even with Louganis and *Party of Five*'s Mitchell Anderson in the cast, Jeter is the undeniable star of this *Boys in the Band*. He brings down the house in the role of Emory, the lonely, mischievous, heartbroken pansy that delights in taunting. Jeter's Emory isn't pathetic in the least, just deeply aware of his precarious position in the world. *The Boys in the Band* was a shocker when it opened Off-Broadway in 1967. It's still controversial today. The depiction of a gaggle of hissing homosexuals is a bit too close for comfort.

But Jeter is an actor's actor, devoted to finding the emotion heart of the characters he portrays, and unwilling at any time to conceal himself or his views for the sake of passing fashion. "When he takes something on," says a friend in New York City, "he gives it everything he's got. He is almost *compelled* to tell the truth." When he won his Tony in 1990 for his performance as the dying bookkeeper, Otto Kringelein, in Tommy Tune's production of *Grand Hotel*, he stole the show at the awards ceremony by announcing before millions of TV viewers that he was in recovery from a substance-abuse problem. Last April, he made headlines again at an AIDS-in-Hollywood symposium, held at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences: "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," Jeter remarked in his prepared speech. Then, without warning, he pulled a pillbox out of his pocket.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," he said. "My very best friend. My constant companion." Inside were his scheduled does of Crixivan, AZT and 3TC, the medicines that have kept him healthy, with an undetectable viral load, since he was first diagnosed with HIV in 1996. By the time he finished speaking, a witness said, "half the crowd was in tears."

"Why did I do it?" he reflects later, when I wonder about the motives behind his unexpected announcement. He's had plenty of time to think about it since April and to gauge the reaction, not all of it favorable, in the entertainment industry—an industry with a higher-than-average concentration of gay men and lesbians, and a higher-than-average incidence of HIV in its ranks, as Jeter somewhat bitterly points out.

"Do you realize that ten thousand invitations went out to that symposium?" he asks. "Ten thousand! And fewer than two hundred people showed up!" He sounds not so much angry a incredulous: "There we were, supposedly discussing the impact of AIDS in our community, and where were the people who are actually living with the virus? The entire panel was made up of people who play people with HIV on television. The moderator was an oncologist, for God's sake!

This was about HIV and AIDS, and the only people there were people there were people who pretend to have AIDS for a living!" He shakes his head. In the last six months he has appeared on national television several times to talk about his condition and recently started to work with high school students and community groups to educate them about an illness that still remains—Jeter doesn't know why—shrouded in mystery and concealment.

"My only interest in talking about this anymore is doing service," he says. "Only if it can help other people. I don't like to put it this way, but I'm not a professional faggot. I'm an actor and a gay man, but I haven't made my career as a 'gay actor.' And I'm not going to make a new career as an actor with HIV."

On the night I saw him in *The Boys in the Band*, he was working at high speed, determined to give a fully rounded performance in what was, after all, only a staged reading. The theater was hot that night, and Jeter wasn't' the only actor on stage who'd broken out in a sweat. Still, I heard the whispers in the rows behind me—"Is he all right? Is he sick? Look how red he's getting"—and I could tell, along with the rest of the audience, that when Jeter suddenly whipped around, paused rolled his eyes and uttered Emory's immortal line, "Who do you have to fuck to get a drink around here?" he was speaking with real conviction.

I think the gay community doesn't really understand Hollywood at all," Jeter sighs when I meet him next. He's invited me and my lover to lunch at his house in the Hollywood hills, which he purchased in 1992 during the successful run of *Evening Shade*. He shares it with his lover, Sean Blue, a stunningly attractive, warm, generous, "luscious dreamboat" whom Jeter met two years ago while they were walking their dogs.

During our interview, Sean is continually up and down, answering the telephone, fetching mineral water, serving deli sandwiches out on the patio. He isn't shy, and he isn't servile. He's just busy, fresh from a trip to Hong Kong—Sean is a flight attendant with United–and getting ready to take his 16-year-old nephew, who's been visiting from Canada, to the airport for an afternoon flight.

There had been some question earlier on as to whether Sean would make an appearance at all today. Prior to our meeting, Jeter and I had had a lively e-mail correspondence in which he allowed himself to vent about the "scumbag" ethics of the press, and the "sour taste" that's been left in his mouth since he went public with his HIV status. Almost immediately after he made his announcement at the AIDS symposium in April, a reporter from *The National Enquirer* turned up at his door, bellowing questions at the top of his lungs: "How long you been sick? Is that your partner? Is that the guy you caught AIDS from?"

Only when they realized that—no matter what—the press would have its story did Jeter and his lover agree to discuss it further. In good Hollywood fashion, in an effort at spin control, they hired a publicist.

Jeter has had an especially hard time with gay journalists, he says, who keep telling him that he should have disclosed a long time ago.

“But I’ve never done the dog-and-pony show,” Jeter protests. “I’m not that kind of a man. Who’s going to care if Michael Jeter is gay? He never gets the girl anyway.” Not that Jeter has ever been closeted in Hollywood. “I’m living ‘out,’” he declares. “I’ve never been to any Hollywood function without a man on my arm.” But HIV is something different, he thinks, something far more serious and potentially destructive.

“Before protease inhibitors, actors in Hollywood really had no incentive to disclose their HIV status,” he declares. “It isn’t a question of ‘image.’ The gay press has it wrong. The question really isn’t, ‘Should I disclose my status?” but “will the insurance company put up the bond?” How many character actors like me can afford to do that?

It’s a warm afternoon and we’re sitting outside, in the sight of the pool but well in the shade. To Jeter, it’s a much-needed rest before heading to Minneapolis to shoot *The Naked Man* with Michael Rappaport; he goes immediately to Poland after that to film *Jakob the Liar* with Robin Williams and next-up “It” boy Lieb Schrieber. To me, it’s a “Bactrim day”—a day for avoiding the sun. My lover, John, has just started Crixivan and is still adjusting. Jeter is immediately attentive, worried about us and quick to provide water and friendly reassurance. Something about our shared experience, our common battle against viruses and toxic medications, may account for the splendid synergy that arises as the afternoon wears on. Or maybe Jeter really is as nice as he seems.

What I remember most about Michael is how much everyone loved him,” says Fran Bradfield, a mutual friend who was Jeter’s dresser on Broadway in *Grand Hotel*. “If there was anyone who didn’t adore him, we didn’t know about it. He stays with you. You hope he’s going to stay with you for the rest of your life.” Somewhere along the line, on his road to Broadway and the Tony Award, Jeter had a small ladybug tattooed on his shoulder, and Fran remembers that other *Grand Hotel* cast members used to kiss it for good luck before going onstage.

I ask him about his neighbors in the Hollywood hills, and he reels off celebrity names as if they were Smith, Jones and Moskowitz. Brian Wilson. Rebecca de Mornay. Penny Marshall. David Lynch. Just down the road, he says, “is the hosue that Joe DiMaggio bought for Marilyn Monroe.” Earlier that day, I’d suggested to John that we might want to make a pilgrimage to Marilyn’s grave in Westwood Village Mortuary. John had declined, politely, but with evident relief.

“These youngsters,” Jeter says, perching his hand on his hips and tossing his head like Scarlett O’Hara at the Twelve Oaks barbecue. “We have so much to teach them.” He’s an intellectual, among other things, manifestly intelligent and very widely read. He’s a man who can discuss the Bible, Virginia Woolf, Tolstoy, Proust, Eudora Welty, Dame Maggie Smith and the U.S. Constitution without missing a beat. On the subject of the Bible, in particular, Jeter’s got plenty to say. “I defy the church’s authority to tell me how I can be or how I can live,” he declares. “Anyway, I don’t believe in that god. Because he’s only had one bestseller. My god is the fucking Barbara Cartland of gods!” When Sean comes out on the patio again to say that he’s taking his nephew to the airport, Jeter puts on a sorrowful face and yodels, “Goodbye, my love! Don’t’ forget me!”

“You’ll be back, won’t you?” I ask. “Everybody wants to know about the boyfriend.”

“Oh, he’ll be back,” says Jeter. “I signed the will.”

“He beats me, too, you know,” says Sean. “Will you put that down? I have witnesses.” With a laugh and a kiss he heads for the door. Jeter looks after him mournfully.

“There have been so many husband,” he says, in his fruitiest voice. “I’ve killed them all.”

For a man who was raised on the Tennessee-Alabama border in a town called Lawrenceburg (“as in Vicki,” says Jeter), it’s been a long, strange road to stardom. Regional theater followed college in Memphis and led to a lucky referral from Christine Baranski to her manager in New York City, who got Jeter his first break in Milos Forman’s movie version of *Hair*. He worked off and on throughout the 1980s, but quit acting for a while—this was during his embalming-school period—to find out what really mattered to him.

He was ultimately rescued by an agent who told him she had “a cute little part” for him on *Designing Women* in Los Angeles. TV work led back to New York City and a variety of Off-Broadway roles. Then Tommy Tune, with whom Jeter had worked earlier in *Cloud Nine*, called him for *Grand Hotel*, He’d had no voice or dancing lessons, but he won the part of Otto Kringleien, the meek, dying Jewish bookkeeper who spends his life savings on one last, madcap fling at the finest hotel in prewar Berlin.

“The irony was, I was playing a many who was dying,” Jeter says, “and the star of the show, David Carroll, really was dying.” Carroll was dying of AIDS although few people knew it. Jeter found out during the Boston tryout when he saw a bottle of AZT in Carroll’s hotel room.

“I saw the bottle and just burst into tears,” he says. “David made me vow not to tell a soul. And I didn’t.” Triumph on Broadway led to Jeter’s featured part in *Evening Shade*, for which he was eventually nominated for three Emmys. But if he was now secure in his profession, his personal life had begun to unravel. In 1995 he ended a five-year relationship with a man he doesn’t name but who is remembered in New York City as “a junior version of Mel Gibson—absolutely gorgeous.” It was a relationship Jeter had begun during the great success of *Grand Hotel*, when he might have found it easy to have stars in his eyes.

“I always had a hard time allowing myself to enjoy success,” he says. “I knew how to show up for a failure. I could type!” His failed relationship—his last before Sean—he now considers to have been symptomatic of an underlying malaise.

“It was really about deflecting my feelings,” he thinks, “about not dealing with what was happening to me.” He worked long and hard with a psychotherapist to end the attachment cleanly, and then, when he finally broke it off, his therapist suddenly died the very next day.

“He just died on me!” Jeter exclaims. “I’d ended my relationship, my shrink had died, and Newt Gingrich had just become speaker of the House. I had reason to be depressed.” When he talks to me now about how and when he was exposed to the virus, he does so calmly, with the kind of

gentlemanly discretion that betrays his Southern origins. He was “so depressed” during 1995 that he could “barely function,” he says, and found himself dating a series of Hollywood parasites and stargazers—these aren’t quite the words he uses—one of whom, in particular, “wasn’t very nice.”

“He only wanted to get an agent,” Jeter snorts. “He actually told me once, ‘You’re certainly not someone I’d want to be seen on the arm of at the White party.’” Jeter sighs: “for the next year, I was the Whore of Babylon.”

He had tested negative as recently as November 1995. But when he became ill in December of that year, suffering from a rash, flu-like symptoms “and all the rest of it,” none of his doctors even thought to ask about AIDS. In the meantime, he had met Sean Blue, and when they both went to be tested in May 1996, they go the news. Sean was negative, but Jeter was not.

“I’m an intelligent man,” Jeter continues. “I knew how to prevent it.” He repeats again, almost pro forma, that he had been in “a real depression” when he let his guard down, and that he may have been seeking “an element of danger” in an effort to feel alive and in control. He knows there are no easy answers here, and he doesn’t pretend to have one.

“I can handle it,” he finally says. “I can’t feel bad about having it. I feel no ill will.” He’s “pretty sure who it was,” and understands why the other guy didn’t reveal his HIV status before they had sex: “I understand that fear of being shunned. And if it was the person I think it was, I can’t tell you it was an altogether unpleasant experience getting it.

Jeter rejects as inadequate the facile approach of most AIDS prevention strategies, with their constant emphasis on condoms. Right or wrong, he doesn’t hesitate to point to the contradictory desires that have always been a party of the gay experience in America.

“I don’t think people even in the gay community understand how traumatic being gay really is,” he says. “Because there’s nothing in our culture that supports you. Even today I find myself having to fight against the desire to have a secret life. I don’t want that. I want to merge that destructive impulse into whatever creative life I have. And I think that’s still what’s dividing our subculture. We’re taught to have secrets.” Now, as real advances are being made in the treatment of HIV, gay men living with the virus are “more and more like the relatives the family doesn’t want to see,” Jeter asserts. “We’re the members the community is ashamed of, because we have a sexually transmitted disease in a culture that still bases so much of its idea of itself—and everyone else—on sexuality.”

He warms to this topic. “We are crippled by our advertising and by our glossy magazines,” he goes on. “I hate Calvin Klein. I hate all those people who’ve taken what was once one of the most beautiful and luscious things I’ve ever seen—the male torso—and turned it into just another torso, any old torso, a bland, plastic, identical torso just like everyone else’s.”

As for those national AIDS writers so prominently raising a call for an end to promiscuity, Jeter thinks they might be more convincing if they wrote for publications that were less shiny. An editor

at one of America's leading gay publications, preparing a story about Jeter and HIV, "got all wounded" when he told them he thought "the glossies aren't helping any."

"Would you put me on the cover of your magazine?" he demanded. The answer was predictable—no—but the explanation was lame. "You're an award-winning actor," the editor told him. "You're a serious actor, whereas [X] looks really good in a t-shirt."

Jeter canceled the interview. Another gay monthly canceled on him because he'd been talking to the magazine he'd just canceled on. And both magazines got huffy when they heard that Jeter would be talking to *POZ*.

"Yeah," he protested, "but I'm talking about HIV! I'm talking about how actors in Hollywood don't need to be frightened anymore. I have a powerful message. I don't' feel compelled to convince these people that I'm OK. I'm not going to have anything to do with people who are ashamed of me. I'm proud of the life I have. But it worries me sometimes because it's taken HIV"—he stops to wave his arm in a sweeping gesture that embraces the house, the pool, the dogs, and above all, the absent Sean on his way to the airport—"to bring all this about."

Now, he sums up his mosta heartfelt thoughts about himself with a reference to the man he loves most—Sean.

"You see what a beautiful man he is?" Jeter asks. "And even he feels he istn' good enough. And that's the question I want to ask every faggot out there, with or without HIV: 'What would it take for you to feel good enough?'"

Just before we leave, the doorbell rings. Jeter comes back out on the patio with a wry look and an envelope in his hand. It's from the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, for whom the cast of *The Boys in the Band* had raise $50,000 the night before. The letter arrived postage due.

"Figures," says Jeter. "Who do you have to fuck to get a drink around here?" Then he laughs, and laughs, and laughs.null

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