Net Serve

Behind the screens at Rentboy.com

August 1, 1999 By Donald Suggs

Located in the downtown meatmarket district, the Lure is Manhattan's only gay leather and fetish bar. But tonight it hosts the Hustler Ball, where a dozen or so aspiring Toms of Finland -- surrounded by the Dicks and Harrys who admire them -- put aside the question of which leather outfit to wear and focus on the more pressing concern of next month's rent. Though the audience is still predominantly boot clad and cruisy, the usual bondage demo has been replaced by a set by the Velvet Mafia, a rock 'n' roll band named after the hustling world's most prominent gay benefactors. Behind a black scrim that demarcates the dressing area, 32-year-old Thomas Weise, the organizer of tonight's festivities, is trying to pull together a strip set.

As head of Rentboy.com, the Internet's largest online escort service, Weise is used to rearranging the merchandise -- but normally he does it with the click of a mouse. Escorts pay $50 a month to place an uncensored display ad on his site. Clients can browse through more than 300 listings -- representing escorts from around the world -- by completing an online profile of the characteristics they're shopping for (such as race, body type and specific sexual proclivities). But this home-shopping approach doesn't diminish the site's kid-in-a-candy-store appeal. "Escorting is sexy because it's controversial," says Weise. "And because it's always been part of the underworld. But it's something we should learn to deal with openly."

Born to a well-off family in Germany's Lower Saxony state and sporting a resume that includes a master's in political science, Weise might seem an unlikely candidate to digitalize the hustling community. But his credentials obscure the challenges he has withstood. After being diagnosed with HIV in Germany in 1993, Weise won a paid internship at the news program *The McNeil-Lehrer Report* in Washington, DC, where he decided that America was a more hospitable environment for people with the virus. After finishing his master's degree in Germany, Weise, already estranged from his family for reasons unrelated to his diagnosis, flew to New York in the winter of 1995. But employment opportunities were few, and he quickly depleted his savings.

"I was hospitalized for exhaustion," Weise recalls, "and ended up on the street." Eventually, the jittery but fastidiously dressed man with a carefully sculpted physique scored a job at the computer consulting firm where he now runs Rentboy.com -- but not before working as a nude dancer at a Times Square revue and spending several months as an escort. "Dancing is a way to express yourself," he says. "But it involves total public exposure. Escorting can be very private

and low key.” Armed with his own experiences, Weise has set out to make escorting an even less risky proposition by making Rentboy.com a site where professionals and clients alike can obtain information about protecting themselves from HIV.

“A lot of escorts are HIV positive,” Weise says. “But I’ve never met one who is open about his status with the clients -- not a single one. My goal is to prevent another escort from getting infected or from infecting a client.”

The resources are badly needed, as safer-sex negotiation during sex work is so strongly influenced by financial concerns. Aaron Lawrence, 24, who markets his charms with the zeal of an infomercial host, explains the dynamic to me. While the other escorts manning the Rentboy.com booth at the ball take breaks to walk around and cruise, the perky, New Jersey-based blond is all about shop talk and selling merchandise, in this case, copies of his self-penned memoir, *Suburban Hustler*. “Some clients are strict about safer sex,” says Lawrence, who spends more than $10,000 annually to market himself online. “They won’t have oral sex without condoms. Or they won’t tongue kiss. I’m like most people -- somewhere in between. I have to be. If you’re really strict about it, you put yourself out of business.”

Backstage, 28-year-old Jack Simmons, who flew in especially to emcee tonight’s event, is in a celebratory mood. He recently had to get an HIV test to appear in a gay porn film in Japan and was relieved to find out that he is negative. He explains that he avoids the pressure to have unsafe sex by holding onto his day job at a Los Angeles clothing store. “It’s not worth risking my life for $200,” he says before correcting himself with a smile. “Better make that 300.” But Weise, whose site is just starting to turn a profit, caters to those for whom taking risks is part of the game. It’s still an uphill battle trying to ensure that the risks are carefully calculated. “You get addicted to the fast cash and the sex,” Weise explains with a shrug. "Thinking about HIV becomes like a bad aftertaste.

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