Regarding Henry

This Broadway swinger keeps AIDS up in lights

September 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

Thirty-three-year-old thespian Henry Menendez is known in the business as a triple threat: a Broadway "swinger" equally adept at singing, dancing and acting. He's such a pro, in fact, that he hasn't worked a single day job since his senior year at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music: While other theater types awaited their big break while waiting tables, Menendez toured Europe with Cats *and* Les Miserables *before lighting up the Great White Way in 1991 in the Tony Award–winning* Miss Saigon*.*

It's hard to hold his luck against him, though. His laugh is quick and his manner easy, despite having had four nasty opportunistic infections since his first POZ *cameo in the October/ November 1994 issue. While his 1995 AIDS diagnosis in no way brought the curtain down on his brilliant career, Menendez's most recent public appearances have been in print—fans may recognize his gorgeous mug (if not the "HIV+" tattoo on his butt) in the current national ad campaign for Sustiva. And even if Menendez is eventually forced to retire, that's OK, he says—he earned it, dammit!*

Were you worried that appearing in a Sustiva ad would damage your career?
No. I was already out about being positive, so I had nothing to lose. Besides, a lot of Broadway actors have HIV, and there's a consciousness around it. In Los Angeles it's different—everyone has to be perfect and beautiful. I actually looked for HIV positive character roles in LA—and failed. LA is ruled by the TV and film industries, which are geared toward mainstream America. They're afraid to do anything too risky.

Not exactly a place for someone with health problems.
Right. In the last five years I've had *Mycobacterium avium* complex (MAC), *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), human papilloma virus (HPV), intestinal parasites and wasting. I came down with MAC just as I was starting the first *Miss Saigon* tour. I had neuropathy and started showing up to work every night catheterized—with an IV drip attached to my arm via an Ace bandage. The directors were worried. I dropped down to 134 pounds, and my T-cell count was around 50. I was swinging 22 roles, which means knowing the parts, covering for sick actors and coaching new people.

How did you make it through the tour?
IV immunoglobulin is a great thing, I have to say. It cleared up my neuropathy in a month.

Have you had any luck with a protease regimen?
No. I'm one of those people who can't take protease inhibitors—living proof that the AIDS crisis isn't over. I've tried them all, and the side effects outweigh the benefits. I was part of an early Crixivan study, and it did lower my viral load and raise my T-cells, but it gave me terrible indigestion and stomach aches. Plus, I was starting to get a potbelly, and you can't have that in my line of work. Now I take Sustiva, d4T and 3TC. Since 1997, I've also been on acyclovir for HPV and Bactrim for PCP. I also take the antidepressant Zoloft, testosterone and vitamins. I'm on ADAP, thank God, or I could never afford it all.

Any special diet?
Not really. I just try to eat well and keep my energy up. Unfortunately I still smoke, but I guess everybody has to have one vice.

How do you feel now?
Pretty good. Over the last year, things have been better. The HPV turned cancerous in 1997, but they got it all with surgery, and it hasn't come back. I'm taking it easy these days—no more grueling schedules. I'm still swinging for the local production of *Miss Saigon*, but I'm not touring anymore, so I can sleep regularly and work out. For the past year my T-cell count has been 160, and my viral load between 4,000 and 5,000.

And now, for your next number…
Now I consider myself in semiretirement. I don't want to say I'll never get back to where I was before I got sick. But it's been nine years since I tested positive—that's a long time. I try not to project too far into the future. I have a great relationship and accomplishments that I feel good about. As long as I live day to day—sometimes minute to minute—I'm happy.

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