Sister Act Up

Kathy Najimy comes out of Veronica's Closet to talk politics

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With her hilarious performance in 1992's Sister Act *and her two current primetime sitcom roles—Olive, sidekick to Kirstie Alley's Veronica on* Veronica's Closet*, and Peggy Hill's surly voice on* King of the Hill*—Kathy Najimy keeps the laughs coming. Comedy may be her profession, but Najimy can get quite serious. Who can forget the poignant moment during* The Kathy and Mo Show *when she portrayed a cooing aunt who fusses over her dying nephew and says, "AIDS. When you whisper it, you give it shame. When you yell it, you conquer it"? Najimy's been yelling for several years by lending support to such AIDS service organizations as LA Shanti and Project Angel Food.* POZ *interrupted her busy holiday schedule to find out where this sister gets her act.*

***POZ*: You championed gay and lesbian issues before becoming involved in AIDS. What's the connection for you?**

Kathy Najimy: Even though we know AIDS isn't a gay disease, the perception between California and New York is that it is. We are a country immersed in shameful homophobia. Just look at the Matthew Shepard murder—things are not getting better. As long as people hate fags, they won't care about AIDS. And as long as people don't care about AIDS, there will be not only pain and suffering but hate. I work for other causes, but it's hard to take time from AIDS. It's number one on my list.

There was a time when Hollywood took on AIDS, and red ribbons were de rigueur. Now the cause isn't as sexy. Why?

Like everything, there's a wave of popularity. I was just grateful that the wave was AIDS. Sometimes people ask what I think about celebrities who do political work to get attention. My response is, I don't care if they don't have a compassionate bone in their body—as long as they're doing the work.

I think AIDS went out of fashion because there has been a lot of publicity about protease inhibitors, which contributes to people's lack of interest. That's why I got so nervous when the drugs started coming out. I kept thinking, "Wait, are we sure?" because then people get lax. This isn't over. We need to use our heads because there's a lot more work to be done.

You're in an ad for PETA, which is anti–animal testing, even for HIV drugs. Have you gotten flack from AIDS activists?

I've received some letters of concern from AIDS organizations. All I can say is that I'm in the middle of compiling information and educating myself. I feel strongly about both issues. Honestly, I don't know enough to be smart enough about it. But if I had to pick one, I'd definitely pick AIDS.

I hear that even your wedding last summer to actor Dan Finnerty reflected your AIDS politics.

When we found the place for our ceremony, it was absolutely perfect, except for these huge framed pictures of Nancy and Ronald Reagan. I had to cover those up. I didn't want Reagan's presence at my wedding. He added to the horror of AIDS by never addressing it. I watched him on television, speech after speech after speech, and he never even said the word. If we're in the middle of a plague and the leader of the country ignores it, it's encouraging people to be stupid, scared and put their heads in the sand.

And President Clinton's AIDS record?

I campaigned for him because the first time I saw him on TV, he was addressing people with HIV. I thought, "I don't give a shit what else he does." So I don't care that he has flaws as a sexual person. His wife should care—she's the only one who should care. I do think his record could be better. It's like *Philadelphia*: Everyone said it could have been better and why didn't they kiss more. I said, "Let's be glad it's here." That's how I feel about Clinton.

Has AIDS entered *Veronica's Closet*?

Anytime anyone has sex on the show, we make sure there are condoms around the bed. I recently did a sex scene, and when I called out "Props," they ran in and threw a bunch of open rubber packages all over the set.

Have your political views affected your acting career?

This is a town of desperation, and your chances for desperation increase every time you take a stand. There are some studios who don't want to work with me because when I do publicity, I talk about things like AIDS. Whatever—I don't give a fuck. It's much more important to my life and my soul to do my political work than to care if I get a role.

When people ask how they can help, what do you suggest?

Visit AIDS hospices. It makes a world of difference and has the most impact. It's not about wearing a tuxedo. It's not about what famous person is sitting next to you. It's not about your speech and how grand you're going to be or what the chicken is going to be like or whatever. It's about the face of AIDS right there holding your hand.

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