Swing Shift

Actor Henry Menendez takes a bow

October 1, 1994 By Dennis Daniel

Henry Menédez biked down from New York City's Central Park on the scalding summer afternoon we met. He had been playing softball with the Broadway Show League earlier and planned to get in a game of tennis after lunch. He came striding into the restaurant carrying his bike helmet, glistening with sweat and looking every inch the young, muy macho guy he is.

For the past four years, Menédez, a successful actor, singer and dancer, has been a "swing" for the Tony award-winning hit, Miss Saigon. Which means that he's ready to step into any of 22 roles at a moment's notice, eight shows a week. And he was recently named dance captain, making him responsible for leading dance rehearsals, putting in new cast members and being generally accountable for keeping the quality of dance in the show at its best.

At 29, Menédez has accomplished what most performers only dream of—he has worked non-stop for years. He landed his first role, in a European production of Cats, while still a senior at the Boston Conservatory of Music. A production of Les Miserables in Vienna followed. Then came his first job in the U.S., national tour of Anything Goes with Mitzi Gaynor. After a year on the road, he was cast in Miss Saigon. Menédez had made it to Broadway. And unlike most young aspiring performers, he had never waited tables, he had never driven a cab and he had never worried about paying his rent. "I've been very lucky," he says with a modest smile. He attributes his easy success to the fact that he can act, sing and dance—what's known in the business as a triple threat.

But in 1990, while waiting for Miss Saigon rehearsals to begin, Menédez learned that he was HIV positive.

"I was in a deep state of denial for two years," he says, suddenly serious. "I went on a big shopping spree, charged up all these credit cards, got myself into major debt, and all that. Because I thought I wasn't going to be around. But guess what? I am," he says.

Telling his family was hard, particularly since they didn't even know he was gay. "There was a lot of fear, a lot of ignorance at the beginning, but I've been educating them," he says. Menédez, part Mexican, French and Spanish, grew up in Buffalo, the fifth of six children. His father is a retired pathologist and his mother is a former surgical nurse so they have no difficulty taking in the medical information and articles that he sends them. getting them beyond conception that HIV is a

death sentence, to understand that HIV is something you live with, has proven to be the difficult part.

Menédez's HIV status became a matter of public record last November when he posed with other members of the Broadway theatrical community for a portait in Carolyn Jones' Living Proof, a photo book affirmatively featuring HIV positive people from various walks of life.

Most performers would be petrified that they would never be given work again after such a revelation. Menédez balks at such talk. "If someone's not going to hire me because I'm positive, I don't want to work for them."

As it turns out, everyone from his company manager to his fellow performers has been very supportive. "As dfar as the theatrical community goes, I don't think there's been a better place to work and be HIV positive," he says. "I couldn't imagine being in any other profession and having the support that I have from everyone. That's something that's very positive."

Like so many PWAs, Henry is concerned about his T-cell counts, tries experimental therapies and mourns the loss of friends who have died. With performances and dance rehearsals, not to mention biking, softball, tennis and singing and dance classes, he keeps up a schedule that would exhast most of us. He also recently competed in the tennis at Gay Games IV in New York City.

"Sometimes I worry about keeping up," he says, "but I don't think about that now. Because I now I can."

And he does—eight shows a week.

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