The Acting Bug

When River Huston steps into the spotlight, HIV steals the show

July 1, 2004 By River Huston

This year, I finally embarked on a dream I've had for a decade: creating and performing a one-woman show based on my life. I've spent 13 years doing stand-up and lectures about sexuality on the college circuit in which I talk about being positive, so I knew I could make people laugh. And I have more than enough material. But I debated whether to talk about my HIV. Left to my own devices, I probably would have omitted it or referred to it in passing—like I was popping a zit.

Why? Sharing the spotlight with the virus is, quite simply, a pain in the ass. When my agent books me on campuses, he doesn't mention HIV anymore. No one's interested. I also knew that no matter what I discussed—my husband's suicide (over his own HIV), my arrest for obscenity, alcoholism, my propensity for back fat, living in the hills as a pot farmer—audiences and critics would focus only on the virus.

Nonetheless, I decided to take the advice of my veteran director and dramatize my diagnosis. I start the show by emerging from a trunk shrouded in fog, assisted by a bare-chested man. While a disco ball showers us with light, he dances and I do a slam poem about living in New York (a little dramatic, but it gets your attention). I talk about my arrest for a high school condom demonstration, then do my strongest stand-up material: bits on vaginal products, penis size and ass waxing. Then I drop the bomb. Slowly. I talk about meeting a guy at a yoga class and how his very proximity has me running to the ladies' room to blow-dry my panties. How we choose not to have sex, then get tested so we can have unprotected sex. I keep it light right up until we're in the clinic guessing people's diagnoses. (I was securing my place in hell.) The doctor calls me in, and I enter to the sound of a heartbeat, thumping slowly, then louder and faster until I'm told I'm positive. I walk toward the audience shaking and whispering my disbelief and my vision of a loveless, sexless, lonely, painful death. Fun, right?

In March, I debuted in Philadelphia and kept HIV out of publicity material and pre-show press. But I couldn't control the reviews (which, by the way, were stellar). The *Philadelphia Inquirer* headline proclaimed: FROM HIV CARRIER, A BIG DOSE OF LAUGHTER. *HIV carrier*. I hadn't thought of that one.

Usually a good review will fill a house for weeks, but the HIV effect kicked in, and box office declined. Which didn't make performing any easier—I was already working hard to bring audiences back from the downer of my disclosure. Worse, the HIV section was bumming me out, too. The

only way I could prepare for the scene was by thinking of a carton of crushed kittens.

Despite the *Inquirer*'s headline, my box office improved when we upped the advertising. But offstage, HIV still hung around. After each show, someone would come talk to me about a son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt who'd died of AIDS. I love these stories. I do the HIV material because I want to help people find ways to deal and still strive for happiness. But they're also a reminder: I share the stage with my virus. The hard truth is, that adage about how you teach the thing you need to learn the most applies, yes, even to me.

After all these years of performing and educating people, I still don't want to accept the fact that no matter what I accomplish onstage, I'll always be "that performer with HIV." Having the virus is like having a bad roommate who is also your cousin. You can't just kick it out. We're moving the show to New York City this year, and, sure, I have the opportunity to take out the HIV part. But, most likely, it will stay.

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