Trip The Light Magnificent

Actor Judith Light shines hers on these dark days for activism and shares Wit and wisdom with POZ Deputy Editor Jeff Hoover.

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You can't ignore the fact that the woman in the head scarf sitting in the yuppie café is bald, a situation she does not really try to conceal. But although bald women usually seem vulnerable and fragile in our society—labeled either "fashion victim" or "cancer patient"—Judith Light exudes nothing but confidence and strength. She, after all, fits neither category neatly: Her striking appearance, so surprising to those who know her from her high-profile, blonde-bombshell roles on the soap One Life to Live and the sitcom Who's the Boss?, is a crucial part of the latest—and perhaps the most profound—step in her career.

Eight times a week, a shaved Light, 50, dons a drab hospital gown for her acclaimed performance as a dying woman with cancer in Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize–winning play, Wit, her first stage role in 22 years. The grueling pace and the technically demanding role seem custom-made for Light, who has poured her considerable energies into AIDS advocacy with a host of agencies including The Names Project and the Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, DC.

POZ: Why should someone with HIV see Wit? It's so emotionally intense that some people I know who have cancer in their lives have balked at going. They think it'll be too painful.

Light: I think it's important for people with HIV, and really everybody, to see it. We're all living terminally—it doesn't matter whether you know when you're going to die or not. And this play is not about dying—it's about living, about the spiritual transformation of a human being. I believe that people living with HIV understand life differently and can become an inspiration to those who are not living with potentially life-threatening illnesses, except life as a life-threatening illness.

Once a week the audience is invited to stay after Wit ends for "Talk Back," where they can ask cast members questions about the play. It's a cathartic half-hour, as many audience members discuss their own experiences. Has HIV ever been brought up?

No, but I usually mention it. A lot of my work with death and dying and illness has been with HIV, so when people ask me what I did to prepare for the role, I always discuss AIDS.

Five years ago, when you were first interviewed for POZ, you said, "For me, being a celebrity is being in a service business, and I wanted to give in another way." Do you still believe that?

Totally. More than ever.

Is that what *Wit* is to you?

In many ways. To me, celebrity doesn't mean a whole lot unless you're finding a way to use it. So I wanted to use it in a different way, with my AIDS work, the human rights stuff for the gay and lesbian community and the speaking I do. The choice to do this play has taken me to a higher level—the stakes have become higher for me personally and my commitment has become stronger.

Do you at all disparage stars who use their celebrityhood to focus on fashion or on lighter things?

I think the world would be better served if they were doing something else, but that's a personal choice.

The epidemic is a lot different now than when you spoke to POZ five years ago, with the advent of protease inhibitors and the fact that PWAs are living longer.

I've seen people come back from the dead. But I've also seen people take themselves to a place where they say, "You know what? This isn't living for me, and I'm going to risk taking myself off all my drugs."

How do you respond when someone says that? Are you automatically supportive, or do you ever nudge them with, "Well, these drugs are keeping you alive…"

This is again someone's personal choice. They live in their own body, so they know best what's going on with them. They have to make the choice that best supports them—it's between them, God and their physicians.

Some advocates for other diseases have been claiming recently that AIDS gets too much money compared to how many people are affected by it. How do you feel about this trend toward disease wars? Is there any way to stop it?

I wouldn't even presume to know how to solve it. But I believe that there's enough to go around for everyone. It makes me so angry—there's enough food in this world but people are starving. It's all political.

Those of us who've been in the AIDS war for so long put ourselves out there—we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. That's why I look at the gay and lesbian community and say, "You guys did

this, and you deserve to get what you got." If others want to stand up in the world, like breast-cancer advocates are doing now, and get what they ask for, I applaud you. I think you are an inspiration.

Somewhere along the line, I think the enormity of the epidemic crushed people.

But we have let ourselves be crushed. There are no victims, only volunteers. The examples are all around, though. You want to see courage? Watch somebody come out. Watch them take the risk of losing their relationship with their parents, their clergy, their brothers and sisters—to say the truth about who they are. Look at somebody who has the courage to come out and say, "I have HIV."

The biggest thing we've come up against recently is the perception that the epidemic is over. The mainstream media just assumes—without looking at Africa where 20 million are infected—

Hello!

—that AIDS is under control. Do you notice fatigue in people you know who are working in AIDS?

Some, you bet.

Do you feel it?

I don't. No. Because I see what happens in the world. I see how the media talks about protease inhibitors and everybody says, "Oh, OK, that's fine, now there's a way to handle AIDS and we're all OK." And we're all looking for the easy way out. We're looking for some kind of Band-Aid. I think it's incumbent upon us to remember what we did in the beginning with this pandemic. We all stood up and said, "This will not stand. This won't hold." It requires those of us who are still participating in this and still writing about this, and ACT UP, and all different groups that are working in the AIDS arena, to say, "We're not done." And we will again show people how to take themselves up to another level.

Does it frustrate you when people don't respond the way you want them to?

Yes, because I've seen what we can do. It frustrates me about myself, when I see I'm not taking the road that demands more of me. I was saying to [my manager] Herb Hamsher the other day, "Wow, I'm tired, and I have two shows today." And he said to me, "You don't get to be tired tonight. You don't have that luxury." So we talked it through. I really listened to what he said, and I moved myself to a different place. I'm not setting myself up as a model or saying that we're not allowed to be tired or feel frustrated or fatigued or up against it or upset, but I'm saying, just look at what the community has already done. It changed the world. When you come to the moment of your death, how do you want to have lived? Do you want to live with stamina and joy and be an

inspiration to the rest of the people and to yourself?

How can we be—to use a word you're fond of—"magnificent" now?

We take this attitude: "You want to put us down, OK, God bless you, we're moving over here." "You don't want to give us any money to put on a benefit, we'll do it ourselves." For instance, the California AIDS Ride—a way to transform somebody's life and to make money for AIDS. Extraordinary. Amazing. It's Elizabeth Taylor standing up and saying, "My friend Rock Hudson…" The examples are legion. We're getting back into being petty and victimized, away from this.

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