Hot And Bothered

Porn debut by hunk with HIV is one-shot deal

March 1, 1998 By Kevin O'Leary

“I didn’t get into this to make a statement,” says Tony Valenzuela, star of *Positively Yours*, the first gay adult film to have HIV as a major plot point. “I just wanted to do brainless porn, make some money and feel sexy.” But the bitter taste left from the shoot has Valenzuela advising other PWAs to keep quiet if they want screen time.

It had a fairy-tale beginning. Valenzuela nailed the open audition with All Worlds Video, a California-based company specializing in adult films. They liked him so much that they offered him two roles on the spot and the chance to be an exclusive model in their gay adult films. There was just one thing--Valenzuela never mentioned he was HIV positive.

As a popular AIDS activist in San Diego who wrote a regular column about HIV in the local gay press, Valenzuela naturally assumed they knew. “Besides, I felt it was a given in porn that the actors had safe sex. But when I told All Worlds, everything turned upside down,” Valenzuela says. “They took away the two roles and said that a person with HIV wouldn’t be considered sexy. They figured the audience would see me not having sex, but infecting someone.”

Enter Mike Donner. An All Worlds director known for scripts that challenge social norms, Donner wanted to make a film with an HIV angle. The same day he was fired, Valenzuela was told he was perfect for Donner’s upcoming *Positively Yours*. The movie centers around a writer who uses his newspaper column to discuss how a recent HIV diagnosis has affected his sex life. As he deals with all his touchy-feely issues, he gets to touch and feel the various fantasy men conjured up to help him integrate his physical and emotional needs.

One can imagine Valenzuela’s look of disappointment when he read the script. He got into porn to play sex-drenched love gods, and ended up with a character who expresses emotions more suited to an after-school special than an erotic film--guilt, resentment and, finally, acceptance.

With such a heavy script Donner, needed an unapologetically sexy stud to cure Valenzuela’s character of his HIV woes and draw the audience in. Jeff Blythe, aka Sam Crockett, joined the cast, a prince with a big name and a big, er, following.

“I was thrilled,” Blythe says. “Mike Donner knows me as someone who can function in front of the

camera no matter what. He knew it wouldn't affect my performance just because someone involved was known to be positive."

With Blythe on board, the project seemed to be in full swing, but after a series of delays, All Worlds got cold feet. The fear was that audiences weren't ready for such an up-front handling of HIV. Valenzuela was beside himself, calling the producers out of touch with the gay community and challenging their trus in safe-sex practices. All Worlds relented and the film was finally shot last August.

The film's release caused a stir in the industry, with some even refusing to review it because to them, HIV killed the fantasy. One person who did look at it was Gary Phillip, editor of *Skinflicks*, a magazine about the industry's movers and shakers. "Donner's been known to push buttons before," he says. "I think he was the perfect person to direct the film."

But Phillip is still troubled by the movie's decidedly mixed message about HIV and sex. From the beginning, the audience is led to believe that the film will feature the same safe sex for all. But during the opening oral-sex scene, it's painfully obvious that Blythe is using kid gloves on his positive playmate. "There's a disparity in the movie about what is safe," Phillip says. "I found it hypocritical that Blythe didn't take Valenzuela's dick in his mouth, but then [two other actors of indeterminate status] have an unprotected rimming scene." Paradoxically, the strict regulations only apply to the hunk known to be positive. The result may be a surprise to Donner, who sought to make a positive film about being HIV positive. Instead, it reinforces the notion that there is a safety in ignorance and few rewards for honesty.

Despite being an exceedingly good boy on film, Tony Valenzuela has still been accused of trying to make HIV fashionable. he was particularly upset by a recent *New York Blade* article in which noted psychologist Walt Odets weighed in on the dangers the film may pose to a negative audience. Valenzuela says, "He thinks negative people will say, 'If Valenzuela can be positive and sexy, what's so terrible about HIV?' Do I need a tattoo on my biceps that says 'HIV Sucks,' so that no matter how big my biceps get people will still know it sucks? Don't ask HIV positive people not to go for all the things we want and don't expect us to explain to you that having HIV sucks."

What frustrates Valenzuela most is that he suspects that he was just a special project for All Worlds. When his contract expired, Valenzuela says he assumed that he could simply extend it as most models do, especially in light of the multiple delays in making the film. The company refused. "All Worlds doesn't want to touch me as fas as being an HIV postivie model," Valenzuela says.

According to Donner, the decision to no work with Valenzuela again had nothing to do with his HIV status, but everything to do with his demands. "He became pushy and greedy," but the movie hadn't even come out yet and Tony got impatient."

Valenzuela's advice to positive up-and-comers considering a career in adult film is blunt. "I know a guy who's really hot and one of his fantasies is to do porn. Trust me, he'd be a star. But he's positive. My advice is that if he doesn't want a battle, he shouldn't disclose."

Fans of Valenzuela's work in *Positively Yours* should not despair. "I am sending pictures to Catalina and other companies. I just want to see if this remains a taboo. What do I have to lose?"

"Look," he continues, "if your story is about HIV and porn then it needs to be accurate. I'm not sure the industry is going to move on this. And if it's going to take another extremely determined pain in the ass like me, it may not happen anytime soon."

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