

My dad once said to me, "Why can't you just be gay and shut up about it?" For years that's exactly what I did—I believed that being gay was bad, that you shouldn't like gay people, and that if you were gay, then for God's sake you should never tell anyone. All that has changed: On June 2, on *Geraldo* of all places, I came out as a gay actor-comedian. After years of anguish I finally got it together and told the world I was homosexual—on TV yet.

For years all I had ever wanted was to be a good actor who was respected and able to make a living (OK, maybe a little bit more than a living). That picture never included being a gay man. I had never seen a gay person do that; ergo, it never occurred to me to stand up and be counted. When I was first starting out, my comedy style was often compared to that of Paul Lynde. Although he was a funny, talented actor, I felt stifled by the comparison because it seemed the industry couldn't get past his homosexuality to accept him in serious straight roles.

I want the opportunity to play straight roles without the industry worrying that I'm too light in my loafers. I've always been told I was funny and a good actor, but people would still stare in disbelief when I would read convincingly for a straight role. Years ago a casting director said to me, "Jason, you can't play a doctor. No one would ever believe you could be a doctor." And I said, "Well, what if I went to medical school? Then could I be a doctor? What are they going to say to me: 'I'm sorry, you have the wrong haircut'?" At first I would get embarrassed by these remarks, then scared, then angry. Now I'm out, and I just want to do good work. I have always wanted to connect with people who sit in the dark, but now it's with a twist. This time they'll know that I'm a gay man

Times are a changin'. Publishers are giving money to authors to write books about gay life. Movie studios are doing gay-themed films, and Broadway is so gay that people wonder why there are no gay characters in *Cats*. Hollywood has given us no regular gay TV characters, only recurring characters on *Roseanne*, *Melrose Place*, and a few other shows. *LA. Law* and *Dynasty* have given us the every-

other-year homosexual—in even years they’re straight, in odd years they’re gay.

People say it’s hip to be gay now. They tell me that I’m doing this as a hook for my standup act. That’s true, but it’s more than that. It’s who I am. It’s my life. As the industry can see, gay means money. The comedy clubs are using gay headliners like myself I recently did a gig at Stanford’s Comedy House in Kansas City, Mo., and was picketed by the Moral Majority. The picketers were in turn picketed by my supporters. The show sold out all week, and on the first night I received applause for five minutes before I even spoke, not to mention a standing ovation at the end of the show. Acceptance in the Midwest! Actor Ian McKellen (the only gay person ever to be knighted by a real queen) is out and an example for us all Comics Robin Tyler, Danny Williams, Kate Clinton, and Lea DeLaria all have large followings and are moneymakers. The Crying Game was nominated for an Academy Award for best picture, brought Jaye Davidson (who now appears in an ad for the Gap) a nomination, and made close to \$60 million in this country alone, plus a nomination for Jaye Davidson. If the work is good and if the studios give us the same treatment they gave Arnold Schwarzenegger, we too can make \$48 million on a film the critics don’t like.

If you are Jewish and you change your name to hide that fact, what difference does it make if you become president? There are Jewish kids out there who still think that no Jewish person can be president. And if you’re a gay actor and win an Oscar for your work, it’s for naught if you’re publicly straight and add to the perception that the industry’s highest accolades are reserved for heterosexuals. I’ve waited long enough for power and respect. I’m not waiting anymore, and I’m not asking for less.

We have been a major force in showbiz for years. Imagine what it would have been like if everyone were out, providing us with role models as well as the self-respect and dignity that comes with knowing that others like you exist. It would have saved me from going

to sleep every night when I was a child wishing that I wouldn't wake up. I want to let my younger gay brothers and sisters know that we're not just a passing phase or hip for the moment. We are ready to eat at the dining-room table instead of sitting at a card table with our legs sticking out. It's almost 2000, and AIDS has made us grow up very quickly. This time we're serious. We don't want to be just in the military, we want to be in the world.

Jason Stuart has appeared in Kindergarten Cop and on Murder, She Wrote and is developing a gay-themed sitcom.