



August 27, 2010

## Josh Strickland: Southern Comfort

By Deborah J. Draisin

Twenty-seven year old Southern boy Josh Strickland has been performing steadily since he was a preteen. He was a member of the Charleston Youth Company during middle and high schools. After graduating from the Charleston County School of the Arts, he studied voice with the esteemed Deanna McBroom at Charleston College. He came out to *The Advocate* earlier this year.

Although growing up gay down south may not seem quite as challenging as it did say, 30 years ago, what was Josh's personal experience like? "Charleston is a more liberal place, but I grew up Southern Baptist; it's looked down upon, that's just people's mentality. I remember thinking 'Why do I feel this way, why am I like this?'" he admits.

In 2007, Strickland landed a 14-month gig as the lead in the Broadway play, *Tarzan*, which also led to a cameo appearance as himself in an episode of *All My Children* alongside *Mary Poppins* lead, Ashley Brown. After the show closed, he understudied for the roles of Mark and Roger during the national tour of *Rent* and starred as Will in the jazz musical, *Play It Cool*, in 2008. He then hit the road with *The Broadway Boys* with the likes of Danny Calvert and Michael Scott, to name just a few.

How did Josh land that gig, anyway - aren't they only hiring well-known actors to star on Broadway these days? "It's difficult right now; they're doing a lot of star casting. It is hard to put a show on in this economy. All these kids going to school now for musical theater who desperately want to work in the business aren't being given the chance that I was - I walked into *Tarzan* an unknown, Disney saw something in me. It's hard to get seen on a call now because they've already cast Daniel Radcliffe or something. I hope it goes back to the way it was." he sighs.

Prior to hitting the bright lights on Broadway, Strickland had an earlier flirtation with television as a contestant on *American Idol* in 2003. He also appeared in the season premier of *Star Search* in 2004. Currently, Strickland stars on two TV shows, cult favorite *Peepshow* and close friend Holly Madison's reality spinoff, *Holly's World*.

Is it a difficult transition to make, from the small screen to the big stage and back again? "I guess it is kind of different. On Broadway, nobody knows who you are. I mean, you get the stage door people, but those are just people are coming to see a show."

And now? "I'm getting recognized because of Holly. People are coming to see us both now on *Peepshow*, because they know that I'm the singer. It is strange."

It's debatable as to whether or not the short-lived attention obtained on shows such as *Idol* or *Star Search* are enough of a push. "I knew that if I was going to get anywhere, I needed to go somewhere big. It's almost like you have to nowadays" he argues.

Was there a Plan B? "It was about believing in myself; you just have to get out there. I grew up singing all my life. The main thing was just to try it and if it worked, it worked. If it hadn't, I was ready to go back to school and happily stay in South Carolina doing who knows what."

Was there ever a fear of failure? "Yeah; you just have to pick yourself back up. Everybody's going to have an opinion, and this is what I had to get over. I kept on going; I moved to New York and I auditioned - I got my behind out there and I kept trying. You know, somebody's eventually going take a chance on you; it's all about being in the right place at the right time."

So what was it like having your cattle call replayed on national television? "It's crazy! You think that it's going to be a talent show, but there are 50 producers behind the 3 judges, and they're coming up to the

table and you never know what they're saying. During the group performances, they were cutting good people" he muses. "I mean, why were they picking the worst people just to have some bad singers on?"

Wait, is he saying that the show is fixed - that they're intentionally pushing people through just so that they can make fun of them? "Absolutely they are! It's sad; you see these completely awful people going in front of the judges, but what they don't show you is that they had to go through two other executive producers before they even get to Paula, Simon and Randy. They're boosting them up: 'Oh, do that, the judges are gonna love it!' and so they actually think that they're good! That's why you have all of these disappointed people who are like 'Really, I'm that bad?'"

Having taken himself out of Charleston, thrusting himself into the anonymity of New York City and then finally moving into the den of inequity that is Vegas, did those changes of scenery, combined with the confidence that comes from being amongst friends and working steadily on Peepshow and Holly's World contribute to his decision to come out now?

"You know what? It's funny that you should ask that! During Tarzan, everyone pretty much knew that I was gay, but I was never asked about that during interviews. What was more important to people was what it was like working with Phil and how it felt to play such an iconic character. The sexuality issue was something for people to chatter about amongst themselves" he chuckles "Coming out now... I think that I first and foremost didn't want to hide it anymore. I'm myself on TV, so why shouldn't I be myself in real life as well? It's who I am, and I have a lot of confidence now because I feel so good for doing it."

During one of the episodes of last season's Holly's World, some bar patrons, frustrated at being unable to charm the girls, resorted to anti-gay slurs against Josh after he'd politely but firmly asked them to back off. "It's kind of sad, you know?" he sighs "It's everywhere you go, but those types of people are not worth giving the time of day to. If they want to be nasty and ugly, then I don't want to have any kind of conversation with them."

For any young person who may be reading Baltimore OUTloud right now and feeling isolated with no means of escape, how would Josh encourage them? "What I want people to understand is that everybody is supposed to be who they are. There's no need to hide it or have regrets about it. There are people who love you - just keep walking away from the people who don't, and don't let anybody get you down."

Easier said than done - what if the kid is going through a really hard time in town, at school? "Don't look at it as a problem of yours" he pleads "You've got to keep looking forward and doing things that make you happy; stay busy. For me, that was my singing; I used my talent. You have to find something within yourself to break out of that place of doubt - drawing, painting, going for a run, playing a sport...just find something that keeps you off of the negative mindset, and it will get better! Sometimes you have to pick your own self up and make a change; it's not going to just happen. We all have to do it for ourselves."

Josh' next solo project is currently in the recording stage, with the first single aptly entitled "Identity." "It's all about finding out who you are and believing in yourself - that you're beautiful and can do anything you want to do."

Josh has done guest vocals for Shania Twain, Phil Collins and jazz artist Kevin Mahogany; he has a beautiful voice. I'm totally looking forward to this next project, and, of course, the promised "cutting loose, going buck wild!" he plans to do for the upcoming season of Holly's World. Stay tuned!