



Wilson Cruz prefers to stay busy. Very busy. Many other in-demand actors would rejoice at the prospect of having a month or two of freedom between television and stage projects. But Wilson Cruz is not like many other actors—and the down time is frustrating.

"I worked almost nonstop from August until the beginning of the year," he explained in a recent one-on-one with Clik. "But now I have all this idle time. I like structure. I like to work. I need to work."

Lucky for us, Wilson Cruz has been steadily working and steadily leading an exemplary life as one of Hollywood's few openly gay actors. Fans and critics have saluted his recurring character Junito from the premiere season of *Noah's Arc*. "I'm overwhelmed by the response," he says. "People are watching the show—in droves. They loved it!"

What most people do not know is that the character of Junito, the HIV-positive young doctor, was tailor-made for the actor: "Patrik-Ian Polk wrote that part specifically for me," he reveals. "I had no idea that it would be so well-received. I just thought that I would come on my friend's show for a few episodes and that would be it." Of course, that was not it; Junito's character was an important plot point in the show's first season, and his relationship with Ricky (Christian Vincent) carried an important message about acceptance. "Junito is positive but he's not a victim. He's sincere. That's what I loved about his character." Cruz is looking forward to the second season of *Noah's Arc* with more anticipation than many fans. "I want to see what's going to happen with Junito and Ricky! Will Ricky change? Will they get back together? I can't wait to read the scripts."

Cruz Control

Actor **Wilson Cruz** Was
"Out" Before It Was "In"
What's Next for the Groundbreaking Actor?

story by **Rod McCullom**

Long before *Noah's Arc* sailed, the handsome Puerto Rican and native New Yorker first came to our attention in the short-lived but critically acclaimed series *My So Called Life*. The show only lasted two seasons and was pulled off the air in 1995. But his star turn as Enrique "Rickie" Vasquez—the troubled gay teenager—is often considered as one of the breakthrough events of

television history. The proof: Wilson Cruz is now a certified pop culture icon.

"VH! just recognized me as one of the top 100 Teen Stars! So it's official. This was amazing to me because I was Number 90, just below Melissa Joan Hart!" he laughs. "But you won't believe how I found out. At the time I was at the gym, in the locker room and starting to shower. I looked up at the TV and saw little Rickie. The pictures ... the hair ... it was just crazy. And I was sooo thin, I must have weighed 102 pounds soaking wet. I wanted to sue that network!"

A moment later, Cruz is contemplative. "So many people still see me as that 16 year old character. But it's been a long journey."

Indeed, since those two seasons of *My So Called Life*, Wilson Cruz has enjoyed a long journey as one of Hollywood's most versatile and energetic character actors. After *Life*, he played J. Edgar Hoover's manservant Joaquin in Oliver Stone's *Nixon*. In 1996, he co-starred with David Arquette as street hustler Mikey in *Johns*, a wonderfully-received indie drama about about the daily (or nightly) struggles of male prostitutes. In 1998, Wilson portrayed Angel in the Broadway production of *Rent*. Then, in 2003, one of his quirkier and best-received roles: In the now cult-classic *Party Monster* as Angel, the club-kid slash drug dealer whose murder was based on a real-life story.

"This was World of Wonder's first feature film," he says, referring to the highly-regarded, queer production company that helped the film. "A few years before the movie was made, [directors] Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey gave me the script. They wanted me to be Angel and I hope I did his character justice ... but those wings!" The actor laughs for a minute, referring to the trademark angel 'wings' that his character wore throughout much of the movie. "We made that movie really quickly, it was only a two day shoot, but I had scars on my back from those wings! There were three kinds of harnessing ... and to think that this kid actually wore those in real-life. Those New York club kids."

That character, like many others portrayed by the classically-trained actor, happened to be gay. Wilson estimates that the majority of his roles have been gay characters. But none of these were stereotypical— "they were not defined by their sexuality," he adds. "With Angel, I didn't have much to work with. There wasn't much on the page. He was Puerto Rican, he was a drug dealer ... I had to create

a character. But every role that I've taken is a challenge. Being gay is just a small part of who we are. The fact is, how you confront changes or react to situations will define how you view the world. When I get a piece of material, a script or a movie treatment, the character can be gay. That's fine. But I want to know more about him as a person."

Unlike some actors who came out later in their careers, Cruz has always been out in Hollywood. "I was out of the closet before it was in," he laughs. "Who else was out in 1994? Hmm. Harvey Fierstein. RuPaul. And me, that was it! Ellen didn't even come out until a few years later."

Unlike other performers—such as Elton John, George Michael, Elton John—who came out later in their careers, Cruz wanted to see if he could be out from the beginning and still make it as an actor. "It was an exciting time. Clinton

“Being Gay is such a small part of who we are.”

was just coming into office, he was actually mentioning gays and lesbians. Times were changing and there was a receptive audience." Plus, Wilson says that *My So Called Life* was the perfect venue. "Here was this network show that was dealing with teen issues in a very real, honest and frank manner. There was a gay character on the show that was trying to discover who he was. For me to sit in the closet while performing this, it would have been hypocritical. So for me, there was no choice. And there has been no turning back."

Besides the *Noah* reruns on Logo—"It should be on DVD in April or May!"—you can catch the actor in a few other big- and small-screen locations. This spring he taped several episodes of *Related* on the WB. Cruz plays the boyfriend of Peter Paige (*Queer as Folk's* Emmett), who is a semi-regular on the ensemble drama. "I was an interesting choice. They're this conservative couple from Cape Cod who run a bed and breakfast. We'll see if they bring me back." More episodes may follow, depending upon ratings and the outcome of the recent WB/UPN merger. The new network, CW, debuts in the fall.

Also on the horizon is the independent film *Bam Bam and Celeste*, co-starring queer favorites Alan Cumming, Kathy Najimy and Margaret Cho. Wilson can also be seen in *Coffee Date*. The feature film is about a straight

man (Jonathan Bray of *The Young and the Restless*) who becomes friends with a gay man (Cruz) after they are mistakenly paired on a blind date.

So far, Cruz says being open about his sexuality has blessed him with a wonderful career: The actor says that early in life, he realized that he never wanted to compromise his principles. "Otherwise, in the end, you have to make a choice: What's more important to you, your life or your career? I don't see it that way because I have always been out. I love LA, I love my friends and the industry ... but it's all based on my choices."

Although Wilson has "always been out," he's refreshingly non-judgmental about those gay actors or performers who are not. "Everyone has his or her own reasons for coming out. I used to feel that it was their duty, but you can't force people to become activists or take on issues that they are not willing. It will do more

harm than good. So for those of us who are out, we just have to take on more fervor. But I can't see how those [closeted] people are happy."

Along with his willingness to be open about his sexuality, Wilson Cruz is also well known as an advocate for youth and gay men of color. "Being black and gay or Puerto Rican and gay ... Wow. That's a lot for any young person to handle. Plus, there is so much internalized homophobia within our own communities." The actor says his commitment to youth and quality projects attracted him to his character on *Noah's Arc*. Cruz says that some of the criticism leveled against the show—as having too many flamboyant or effeminate characters—is just one example of that internalized homophobia within our own community. "It's ridiculous to say that there are no characters like this in real life. I know who these people are. This series was a long time in coming. I am most proud of how Patrik-Ian constructed the series. He makes no apologies and tries to be funny, irreverent and somewhat political in his own way. That's why I love the show."

When reflecting on his role in the groundbreaking show, Wilson Cruz becomes somewhat quieter. "How can any gay man not identify with Junito? He drew the line. He said: 'There are some things that I can help you with; there are some that I can't. You must deal with my status, but I will not allow you to disrespect or make a fool out of me.' Isn't that what all gay men are fighting for?" —Word Count: 1640