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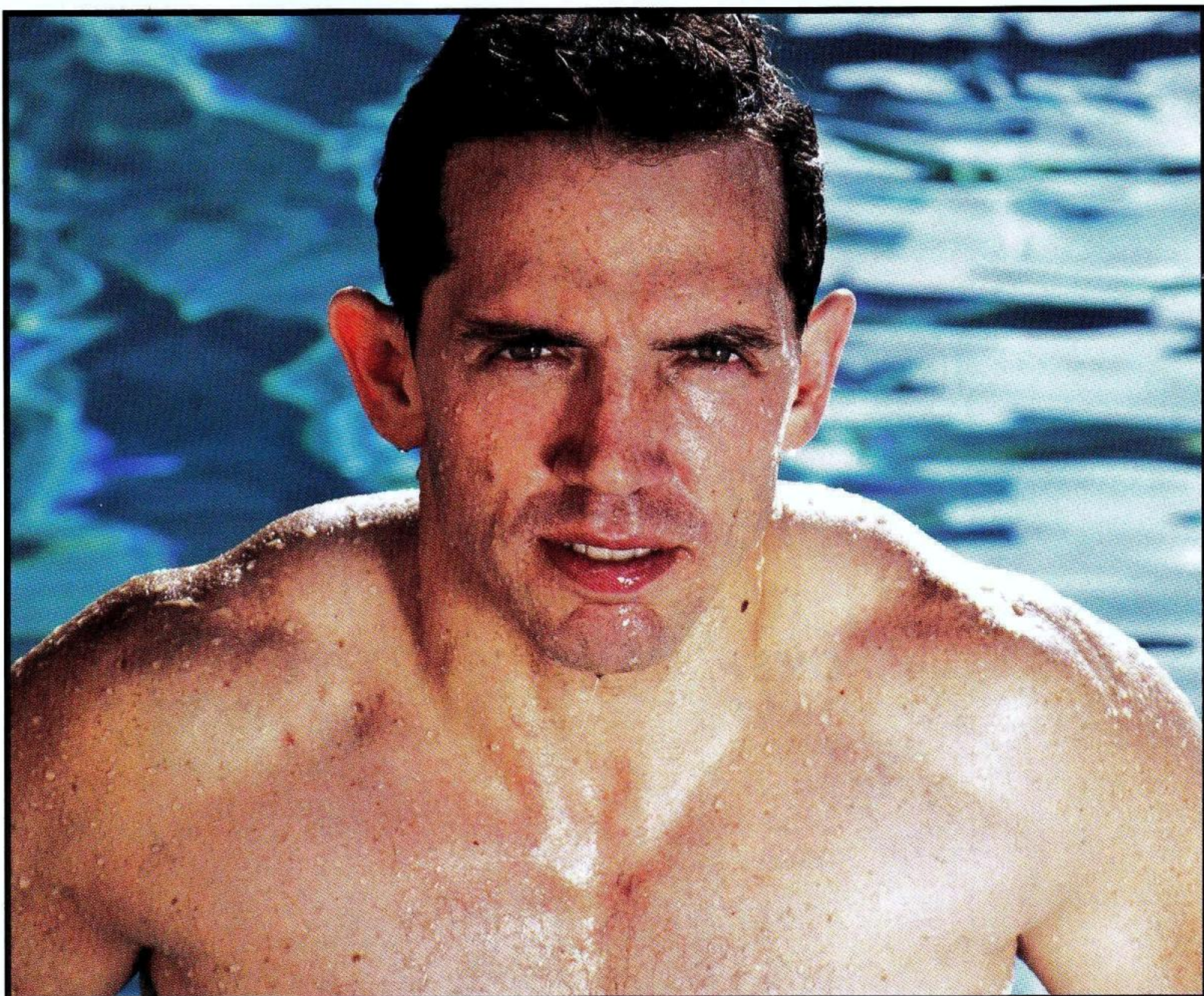




Mel England

by Ruby Comer

A girl's gotta have it. Right, honey? I'm talking about her face creams. Lord knows I've tried gallons of them through the years, but I've currently been using Juice Beauty products. The whole line is made with organic juice and all natural ingredients. *Ya Vol!* It's like putting fresh fruit on your face and I usually like to get my fiancé, Rudy, to lick it off. That kinda revs him up...if ya get my drift. The Green Apple Antioxidant Moisturizer and the Mineral Sheer Moisturizer (30 SPF) are my two invigorating faves. And like the mention of organic, invigorating, and natural in one fell swoop, there's no one who revs me up better than my fave pal, Mel England. I wonder if he uses face creams? Hmm. I must ask.



Mel is an actor and a twenty-year veteran of HIV, having become infected at nineteen. Back in 1989, being diagnosed with HIV was a death sentence. But he fought hard, maintained a positive attitude, and survived. His story is documented in his self-written one-man show, *Swimming with the Polar Bears*, which preemmed Off-Broadway earlier this year. It juxtaposes his tortured journey (childhood abuse, HIV, and cancer) with climate change and endangered species. (All profits were donated to The Climate Project.) The play marks Mel's coming out as an actor with AIDS. He is currently scoping a venue to bring the production to L.A. In December, he's been invited to perform in Denmark at the International Summit on Climate Change. Mel also starred in the 2008 film *Little Big*

Top, is currently filming the feature film *We Support Bob Mackey*, and recently signed a deal to co-star with Sally Kirkland [*A&U*, December 1996/January 1997] in *Love Anonymous*.

We meet at one of my pet digs, Mäni's Bakery, on Fairfax near the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. We sit outside at a cozy shady table on this warm sunny day. Mäni's uses no refined sugars in its pastries. I get the chocolate-dipped almond shortbread cookie *and* an éclair—yes, Ms. Glutton here. Mel orders a chocolate cupcake doused with rosy-red sprinkles.

Ruby Comer: Mel, my darling, do you cream your face? [I bite into my creamy éclair.]

Mel England: [He chuckles.] I use regular old moisturizer, sometimes vitamin E

oil because my mother told me so. [His mother was Native American, from the Navajo reservation.]

Well, it's important to do what mother says! Remember in the eighties that AIDS campaign with Zelda Rubinstein [the clairvoyant from *Poltergeist*; *A&U*, March 1998]? It went something like, "Do what mother says. Wear your rubbers." Dumplin', what inspired you to do your one-man show, *Swimming with the Polar Bears*?

Steven Fales [*A&U*, June 2007]. He inspired and encouraged me. Ya know, Ruby, doing this show liberated me. It's doing justice to myself, honoring my own story, and all my friends who've died from this disease. I was in several support groups and most of the people were much

older than me. I saw many of them die. I was one of the lucky ones. The message of the play is that it's possible to survive. In 1989, from my family to my friends to the media to my doctors, I was getting [the message] that I was going to die. I had to believe that it was possible to survive.

Did you suffer "survivor's guilt" by knowing so many who had died?

Yeah [he says slowly and solemnly.] Absolutely. Survivor's guilt is highly underestimated. It's taken lots of therapy and lots of recovery for me to even be able to talk to you about this. I've had Vietnam vets tell me, "You know, Mel, it's like you've been in a war and you've had to watch your buddies die."

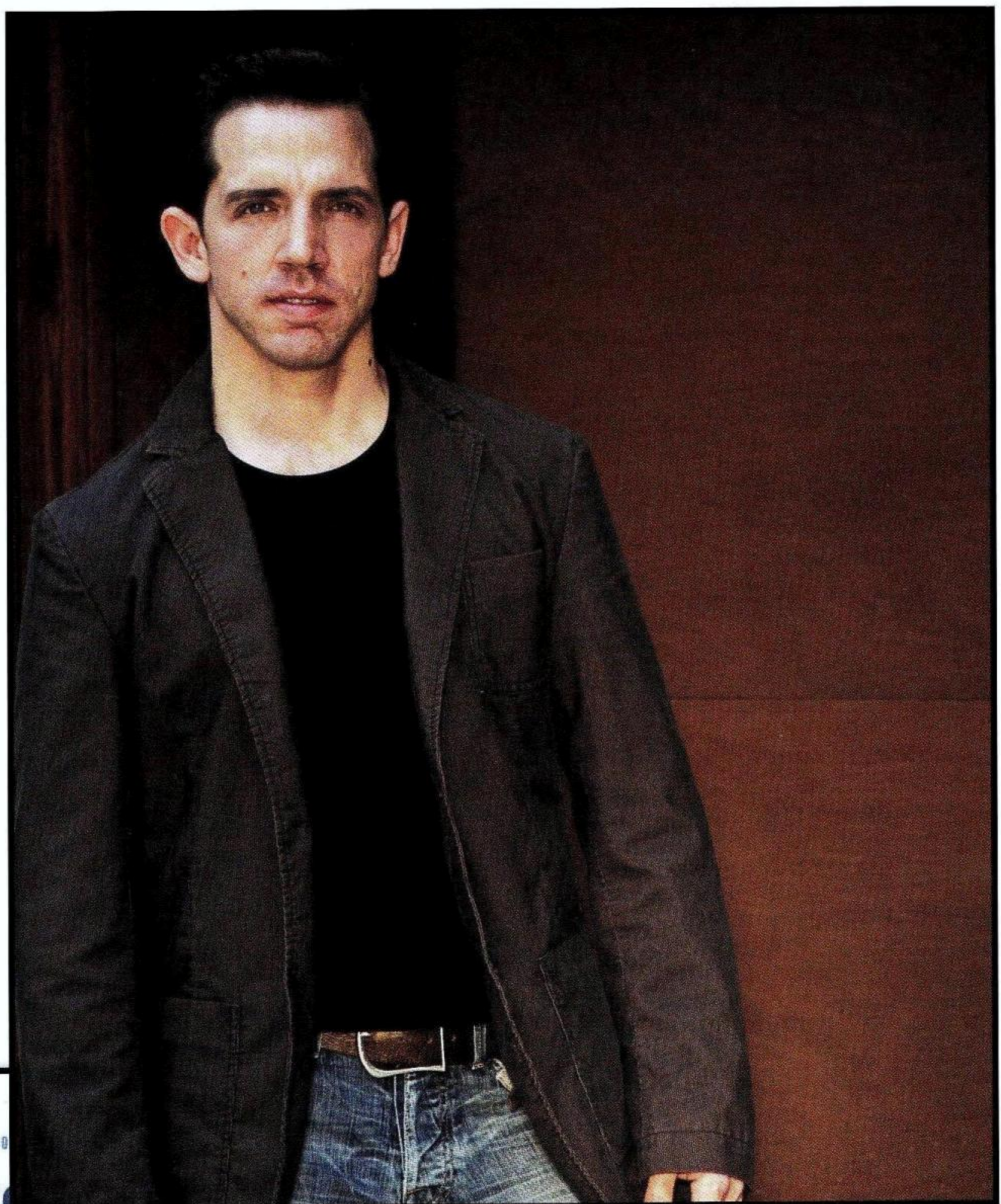
That's a great parallel. So how do/did you cope?

Part of it is accepting that it is real. It's normal and you're going to go through it. I would go to that place of, "Wow, maybe I should join them." [He takes his finger and swipes the top of the thickly laid icing on his cupcake and puts it in his mouth.] Therapy helps, 12-step helps, and grief support groups help.

How in the world did you approach your diagnosis at such a young age?

I became my own activist. After diagnosis, I felt ashamed and afraid. I was a student on a scholarship at N.Y.U. studying theater and acting. I was also attending classes with Stella Adler, Marlon Brando's coach. I thought my dream was dead; that I'd never be an actor.

The only support I got was from a friend who was working at a health food store in Colorado.



She said, "You should come here. People are healing themselves of all sorts of things." I did. I became a macrobiotic and homeopathic. I hiked; I bicycled. I read Louise Hay and Deepak Chopra [books]. I tried to soak

easily go this direction.

I wasn't good at it. I was smoking pot. I've been sober for ten years now. But, I was *trying*. Eventually I did get sick and almost died. But at that point, the cocktails were just coming out and I then embraced Western medicine. I've been on them for the last ten years, but I have taken periodic holidays. And as many others do, I've had to change therapies several times.

So during your time in Colorado and on your alternative path, you stayed away from AZT.

Yes, luckily I did! Through it all, I had the desire to live and that was the most important element.

It seems you have a good balance of Eastern and Western philosophy.

It's not so much about whether to take vitamin E or whatever, but for me it was

up any positive message that I could. My parents were hippies, which explains why I would

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Ruby's Rap

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merely the act of *doing* something. Plus, I don't give too much emotional or spiritual value to the [blood test] numbers....

Indeed. You empowered yourself.

That's most important. How is your current health, Monsieur England?

[I smile, because he looks very handsome and healthy.]

Great, now. But last year I was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma as a result of HPV infection, which causes genital warts. I had that twenty years ago! Anyhow, it was heading to my colon. It's the same cancer Farrah Fawcett died of.

Ho....ly...God....

I did chemo and radiation and *it was a bitch!* [He raises his hazel eyes and shakes his head.] It was a six-month battle, but now I'm cancer-free.

Yay for you! That's peachy. Are you hitched, Mel?

Yes, for a couple years now. His name is Tony. We met, and then six months into the relationship, I got cancer. I told him, "Look, you didn't sign up for this. We can take a break. Let *me* deal with this." He said absolutely not.

Hold on to *this* chap! Mel, you were infected at the age of nineteen. As you know, deplorably, nineteen year-olds are being infected today as well. Will you address this?

Hmm. Hmmm. I can only speak about *my* experience. One of the reasons I became infected was because I had been trained to believe that on some level it was bad or wrong [to be gay], so the way I made it okay, to break that taboo, was to go to the extreme. I'd think, "Well, they say it's bad, so I'm just gonna do whatever the hell I want." [Mel pauses as the waiter refills our passion fruit iced teas.] What I would tell someone is that there's nothing wrong with sexuality, it's God-given, it's beautiful, it's wonderful. There's nothing to be ashamed about if you're gay or straight or whatever....*You*

can have sex! Just be safe.

C'est bien. Yes, I blame this sick attitude mostly on religion, which is the enemy of the people anyway. Don't get me started, Mel. We are *far* past the Victorian Age; sometimes I wonder though. Lordie, I can feel my blood risin'. And, look, I'm perspiring. Gee, I smell like a fruit smoothie. Oh, it's from those Juice Beauty products I use! Hmm, smells lovely. Anyhoo, yes, you hit the nail on the head, Mel. Self esteem is utmost essential in getting people to use protection during sex.

It took me twenty years to learn that sex is okay. It's taken me twenty years to have this conversation with you, Ruby. Teens need to know that AIDS is not a game. There's nothing glamorous about it. You must take pills every day, which can have major side effects and...you may not live through it.

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