



Son Of A Preacher Man

» He was once in a sucking competition with a flight attendant? Er, exactly how straight is this month's Straight Mate, actor Ian Stenlake?

DNA: You play band manager John Ashby in *Georgie Girl: The Seekers Musical*. Tell us about the show and your character.

Ian Stenlake: The show is set in London during the swinging '60s. John knew his way around the music industry and loved life and partying, but they weren't drinking and drug-taking kind of parties, he just loved being around people. So I dare say he remembers everything from that period, which is unusual [laughs]!

From an Australian viewpoint, how would you describe *The Seekers* phenomenon? The word phenomenon is a good one. These were four young Australians who found themselves in London and became not just the flavour of the month, but lasted for a few years. But like most international successes, it all suddenly stops. I didn't know why that happened but in the show we find out.

Do you believe in method acting? I totally believe in method acting, however, from my personal experience I realise that you also have to stay safe. There's no point in going method if you can't get up and go to work the next day. When I was on *Stingers* [Aussie TV show] my character was beaten and ended up on life support. I spent a couple of days in a hospital bed investing in that whole work. But for several weeks after, I had a muscular spasm in my stomach that wouldn't go away! It made me think, *Why put yourself through all that pain when you can just act?* But in order to achieve the most thrilling performances, it does cost you something emotionally and you literally have to bring yourself back.

Have you ever tackled a gay role? I've certainly kissed a guy on stage and I played Cliff Bradshaw in *Cabaret* and he was healthily ambiguous! But I haven't played any iconic gay roles – yet.

You've long been passionate about gay

rights. Things have certainly shifted in the ten years since we last did this interview.

Yes. It's been very interesting to watch gay marriage unfold around the world, and I don't often post current affairs on social media, but I did post how ashamed I was of Australia. Countries like Ireland are ahead of us, and the USA? Hello? I hate to think of it as a competition, but to lose to the USA is very embarrassing! There are definitely some dinosaurs in our parliament and they have become bloody roadblocks. It's actually quite inspiring to listen to some of the American politicians and judges who are putting forward the argument for why gay marriage is common sense. It is very much like racial discrimination, especially the way America has moved through it.

Last time you also spoke about your best gay mates Bille Brown and Michael Cormick.

Yes, since then my wife Rachael and I split up, but she and Michael are performing together in *Next To Normal* in Perth. Michael was Maid Of Honour at our wedding and is Fairy Godmother to our children [laughs]. Bille was my Best Man, but unfortunately he died. It was a big loss as he was my best friend and mentor. No one knew he was also doing chemotherapy to fight bowel cancer. It's weird when in your life you lose a contact who is a 'go-to' person. I always knew I could pick up the phone and call Bille.

Would you still turn gay for Orlando Bloom?

He's too old for me now [laughs]. Actually, he's been off the radar for a bit. Maybe I'll change to Johnny Depp, he's got a bit of swagger, though he may have gone a bit mad. One would say gone to the dogs!

What's the campiest song on your playlist?

I love ABBA. Back in 1975 when I was living in Mackay, Queensland, I was besotted with them. My father is a minister, so we lived next to a church and underneath the house

I played ABBA *Arrival* at full tilt! My dad used to come and tell me to shut up because I was disrupting his service! I had a very vivid dream back then too, that Frida and Benny were my parents.

From a straight mate perspective, what do you think you 'get' about gay people that others don't? My introduction and education toward acceptance came along a path where, in my adolescence, through being ill-informed and in the environment I was in, I actually would have fallen into the homophobic group. So when I became an actor at 21, I was enlightened in a very positive way. I fondly recall my first job in a spoof musical called *Phantoad Of The Opera*. There were a lot of actors and dancers rehearsing and I spontaneously sang quite loudly, "There is nothing like a dame" and then a large hand landed on my shoulder and a breathy hot mouth in my ear said, "You wouldn't know!" I felt quite welcomed. I think when people grow up straight and homophobic it's something about being riddled with fear. Fear of the unknown. People should just try and have a conversation. Gay people won't bite... well not unless you invite them to!

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Speaking of biting, you got quite excited with the return of Australia's favourite chocolate, the Polly Waffle. Yes, in 1995 I came second in a Polly Waffle sucking contest at the Newtown Hotel! I was edged out by a particularly handsome flight attendant who just seemed to know his way around a waffle better than I. It was truly a jaw-inspiring experience!

In the past you have described the trauma of wearing a dance belt. Oh yeah! The best part about those things is taking them off. This is probably quite out of line, but childbirth can be horrendous and painful, but in most cases you will just remember the good bits, and I think when you peel off the thong, it also erases the bad memories. In fact you find yourself thinking, "I could almost do this again!" ★

MORE: *Georgie Girl: The Seekers Musical* is playing at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne. Visit www.georgiegirlthemusical.com. Find Matthew on Twitter @Mattmyers1964.