



“I’d be gay if I didn’t like girls so much...”

Scott Irwin is one of Australia's leading men of the stage. His latest role as *Hairspray*'s Corny Collins is proving a swingingly good time for all involved!

DNA: Have you seen the movie *Hairspray*?

Scott Irwin: Yes, I love the most recent version and have watched it close to a hundred times because my three-year-old daughter is obsessed with it. I'll do the show here eight times a week and then go home and she'll want me to sing and play the character for her.

So she gets an exclusive performance.

She does! And if it's too early in the morning I tell her, "I can't do Corny Collins now because my voice will be too croaky." So now, first thing in the morning she says, "Can you do croaky Corny Collins for me?"

You've played many on-stage roles. Do you have an all-time favourite?

Playing Enjolras in *Les Mis* was a privilege. Performing Gaston in *Beauty And The Beast* was also awesome, but playing Fred opposite Marina Prior in *Kiss Me Kate* was incredible. *Kiss Me Kate* was my high school musical where I played the lead, so to play the role for real, 20 years later, opposite Australia's favourite leading lady was a real "pinch yourself" moment.

Is there one particular role you'd like to play, but haven't yet?

I would love to have been involved in *Jeckyll And Hyde*, had it ever come to Australia. There was talk back in the late '90s that it was going to happen. At the time my name was thrown about with Hugh Jackman's and Simon Burke's, so I was in really good company.

What's it like to be a straight man in the world of theatre?

I came from the art industry into this and never planned to be a performer. In fact, I was dared to audition for my first show, which was *Grease* with David Atkins. But even before then I was surrounded predominantly by gay men and I remember at the age of 19 being at parties and cornered by a group of gay men saying, "Don't worry, it's okay to be straight." So, in a way, I had the flipside experience to what a lot of gay guys would have in straight society. Nowadays I tend to be categorised as one of the older married guys, which is kind of frustrating as well. But as a younger straight actor, especially in musicals, guys were a little bit wary of me.

And people assume you are gay.

Well, the girls were always comfortable with the gay guys and the gay guys were comfortable with each other and the girls. But there was always this implication from the outside world that because I was doing musical theatre I'd be gay. Some guys may have a chip on their shoulder about proving how straight they were, but that never worried me because I never had an issue either way. I've always said I'd definitely be gay if I didn't like girls so much. But I found it particularly difficult to get a girlfriend in a musical, even though I was

surrounded by beautiful and talented women who were often available. I used to be going, "Hey, don't forget about me..."

So you sometimes get mistaken as gay?

Yeah, sometimes. It used to happen a lot in the early days. But the assumption outside of this industry is more prevalent. My mates outside would find people assuming I was gay. But everyone in the industry knows each other and they know my wife as a performer as well.

Who would you turn gay for?

Well going back to people assuming that I'm gay, quite often if someone was interested they would say, "It's because you're straight that we're not together." And I'd sometimes think, "Even if I were gay, you're not my type." Which leads me to the question, what is my type? I don't really know, but I know when I see a good-looking man walk past. As a celebrity, I reckon the closest thing would be Simon Baker. Everyone loves Hugh Jackman, but he's a dear friend so I can't say him!

So you're mates with Hugh?

Yes, I understudied him in *Beauty And The Beast* before I took over his role and we lived in each others' pockets over that year. I was also involved quite heavily when he and Deborra-Lee got engaged. He's a lovely fella and has never put a foot wrong. Even the Oprah incident turned out okay for him.

Do you think that coming out is still a career-risk for an actor?

No, I don't. A career now means a lot of different things. In our industry people are pretty well supported with their choices in that way. I reckon coming out to your family is more scary! As far as damaging careers, I think it often enhances careers because of the extra attention and exposure that can be found from the press having an angle to talk about. I think the benefits outweigh the downsides these days. It's interesting – even in doing this interview, I thought isn't it funny to do an interview that is categorised by my sexuality. If someone like FHM wanted to do "our gay pal" or something like that, there'd probably be an uproar. But for the purposes of DNA it kind of makes sense. I wouldn't think anything at all of playing a gay character in a show and nor should a gay guy playing a straight character. It's all just acting. But some think it will damage their ability to play certain types of roles, because people will think of them as gay.

Have you played a gay role?

I have. In the film *Razzle Dazzle* I played Patrick, the super-suntanned gardening TV show host. I also did the workshop for *Priscilla* and was asked to do *Pageant* back in the '90s. That wasn't so much being gay as being a woman. It was about beauty pageants

and all of the characters were played by men.

I auditioned for the boyfriend in *The Boy From Oz* and I guess kissing a man on stage might be something someone has to get their head around, but by the same token kissing a girl that you're not actually going out with is something to get your head around as well.

What's the campest thing in your house?

Apart from the fact that for 20 years I've made my living in musicals, everything else is very straight. I was always into sport and my music taste was mostly geared to alternative, rock, grunge and funk, so no show tunes or Kylie albums, I'm afraid. The campest thing at home is me! I do have a statue of Gaston from *Beauty And The Beast*, which is pretty camp and there is also my Indecent Obsession T-shirt, which was given to me by David Dixon.

Ten years ago you suffered a serious spinal injury, but you have returned to the stage more successful than ever. What was your secret to bouncing back?

The fractured spine happened a week before my wedding, in 2000. Actually it was a rotten year. I was getting married to my wife Danielle, who I met on *Beauty And The Beast*. My career was going pretty well and I was singing at grand finals. I was even in the *Cleo* Bachelor Of The Year. As far as my buck's party went, it was a day of adventure and extreme sports. The very first thing we did was the cliff jump at Warriewood Beach in Sydney. I hit the water slightly off and took most of the impact on my bum, fracturing my spine in five places. We got married the following week and I was in a full-body brace. I couldn't take a running step for two-and-a-half years, so we moved to Adelaide and bought a Video Ezy franchise. But it's amazing how life works out because David Atkins, who gave me my first job, also gave me the gig that brought me back into the industry, with *The Full Monty*.

Ian Stenlake said the best thing about wearing a dance belt was peeling it off at the end of the day – do you agree?

[Laughing] I actually find them quite comfortable. I find it a bit freaky peeling them off at the end of a performance, but the weirdest thing is handing your underwear to the dresser to take away to wash for you.

What about after the dance belt comes off – are you a jocks, boxers or freeballing man?

Definitely jocks. Although now after a show I'm more prone to freeballing on the way home. When I was younger, I couldn't wear boxers or freeball at all, because that freedom of movement was far too stimulating for me! If I was walking down the street, I'd suddenly think, "I just need to look in this window here for a little while. I just have to stand in this little corner for a couple of minutes until I calm down."

Hairspray is playing at The Princess Theatre Melbourne.