

FROM HOT PANTS TO POT PLANTS

Celebrity gardener Jamie Durie talks about his days as a stripper, his best gay mate, his AIDS-awareness commitments and working with Oprah. By Matthew Myers.

DNA: You've come a long way since your days stripping with *Manpower*. Back then, did you imagine yourself being where you are now?

Jamie Durie: I always wanted to be in a creative position. I've always seen myself as a visionary. What I do today is not a lot different to what I used to do. I mean, I designed stage sets, lighting, costumes, choreography and all those things. These days I'm just performing with a whole new range of materials.

From the beefcake days to *Backyard Blitz* and *The Block*, you've always had a strong following among gay men.

[Laughs] I've lived with gay men and I've always had gay friends throughout my life. I connect with most people and I keep a very open mind.

"The HIV infection rate in some African countries is 20 per cent. Here in New South Wales it's 18. Shameful really."

Do you have a best gay mate?

Yes, I do. His name is James Houston and he recently put out a fantastic book of photography called *MOVE*. The book is six years of work and he has shot these incredibly fit dancers in amazing positions, most semi-naked. All proceeds go to HIV. I'm one of the ambassadors for the *MOVE FOR AIDS* events.

The launch last November was huge!

It was absolutely monstrous with almost a thousand people there. Elton John and Baz Luhrmann both spoke, Sarah Murdoch hosted the event and, of course, James made a speech on the night, too. It really was quite phenomenal.

It's good that people are starting to re-address HIV.

It's about time that HIV/AIDS was put back on the agenda because for the last five years the new infection rate has been increasing. In New South Wales we are up to 18 per cent. In Africa, there are countries that are sitting at around 20 percent. How can we hold our heads up with those sorts of statistics? We've really got to start getting more awareness out there.

What can the average Australian do about AIDS, particularly in Africa?

The first thing people have to realise is that it's not a gay disease. My second point is that everyone should be practicing safe sex. If you choose to have unsafe sex, get tested. That's just common sense. The problem in Africa is not just [a lack of] education and awareness it's also about poverty.

You were there recently to shoot your documentary *Jamie's Journey: Hope For Uganda's Children*.

Yes, that aired last year on Channel Nine. I gave them the program because I wanted people to see what was going on in Africa. It was about the great work that Plan and Uganda are doing in dropping the infection rate from 18 per cent down to four. And yet in New South Wales we are around 18.

Shameful really.

Did you enjoy hosting *Torvill And Dean's Dancing On Ice*?

It was great. It's not

part of what I do everyday. I prefer to work in television that suits my brand a little more, but it was fun for a change.

How do you keep fit these days?

I do yoga three mornings a week, I surf and I do soft sand running. I also have a sea kayak that I paddle twice a week. I try to exercise at least once or twice a day, both before and after work.

The Oprah Winfrey gig... please tell!

It's pretty exciting! I'm still pinching myself. She's an amazing lady. She's learned to use her brand in a very powerful and progressive way. She does it with responsibility; she looks after her community. The way she uses her power is inspiring. She really does give back. She's one of the most warm and genuine people I've ever met and she made me feel very comfortable.

On Oprah you were joined by interior designer Nate Berkus – another gay mate?

Yeah. I loved working with him. We got on like a house on fire. We had a lot to relate to because his boyfriend passed away in the tsunami in Sri Lanka, which is where my mother's from. He did a lot of work to help

support the Sri Lankan post-tsunami relief. It was a great experience working with them and I hope to see them all again soon.

Who has inspired you the most?

Geoffrey Bawa [Sri Lankan architect] from a design point of view, and people like Oprah and Bono from a philanthropic point of view.

On the subject of inspiration, tell us about your book, *Inspired*.

It's a collection of 25 gardens that I've completed over the last couple of years. On top of that, this is my personal collection of designed database images. I've collected over 50,000 in the last 10 years and those in the book are the most potent. The book is meant to inspire people to get in touch with their gardens and start loving our planet.

Do you have a favourite?

Yeah, the Japanese design is one of the best; the one with the swollen and curved timber decks.

What about that ever-stylish plant – the mother-in-law's tongue? There doesn't





"I want people to fall in love with their gardens," says Jamie in his new book, *Inspired*.

seem to be a gay man's apartment that doesn't have one.
 That's probably because it's bulletproof. Not many people can kill off *sansevieria trifasciata*. It's one of the most robust succulents you could put in your garden, and it's extremely drought tolerant.
What's the campest CD in your collection?
 What would leave most people scratching their heads is the first record I ever bought. Have a guess.
ABBA?
 No, worse.
Kylie?
 Come on...
Barbra Streisand?
 The Village People!
Of course! Excellent choice.
 [Laughs] And once I actually went to see them live.
So, how's your gaydar?
 Excellent. It's never let me down. Not that I have to use it much because I have a lot of friends and... I'm in the know!
Over the course of your career, and especially in your Manpower days, were you ever mistaken as being gay?
 Absolutely, all the time. Guys have tried to pick me up a few times. Once I was in drag so that didn't help. But, you know, that's life!

Care to expand on the drag story?
 Oh, well, a girl's got to keep some secrets!
Would you like to be a DNA cover boy?
 Umm... do I have to get my shirt off?
Yes! Maybe you could just undo it down to the navel.
 Okay, we'll do a singlet!
Boxers, jocks or freeball?
 Hmm... I'm either jocks or freeballing.
What do you have planned for the future?
 The US is certainly a focus for me this year. Channel Nine has offered me a couple of new shows and there are a number of projects on the board. I'll continue to create books and keep designing gardens all over the world.
What advice would you give people who have great garden ideas but don't know how to achieve them?
 Don't be afraid to get out there and give it a try. Create a scrapbook, look at the choices you've made inside your house and compare them to an exterior design. Fall in love with your garden again. 🍷

