

INTERVIEW

ACTING NATURALLY

"Friend of Ellen" Patrick Bristow is out in Hollywood and doing very nicely, thank you

by Dale Reynolds

One of the most common shibboleths about Hollywood homophobia is that when an actor comes out he or she can stop sitting by the phone 'cause it ain't never gonna ring no more! And for some less risk-taking actors, this might be true. But for 34-year-old Patrick Bristow, tall, fashionably thin, with bright carrot-colored hair and easy to spot as a gay man, being openly a same-sexer hasn't stopped a steady rise in his

Television

employment.

Currently in his third year on ABC's *Ellen* as her friend Peter, Bristow came from a vast background in comedy, most notably as a writer/performer with the Groundlings comedy troupe in West Hollywood, where he still teaches improvisational theater. The scion of Irish-American Californians, the youngest of three sons (the other two are "husky bikers, black belts in karate, who love me to death") and a self-described band-nerd (first the clarinet, now the Irish harp), he came out to himself during his junior high school years and says he only came alive professionally after he turned 30.

Now this attractive and articulate actor has a two-year live-in relationship with Andy Nicastro, 32, another Californian, who is the production manager for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which is interviewing survivors of the German Holocaust, including three gay victims. He and Nicastro are both "recovering Catholics," although he describes their 70-year-old house as one full of crucifixes and icons. But it is a reasonably happy life for the man. And since Bristow is what one may honestly characterize as "perceptibly gay," he hasn't tried to hide behind a straight exterior, the way so many gay and lesbian actors have had to do to survive.

Comedy, as is commonly known, has always been a refuge for outcasts of all stripes: Make folks laugh and they may not beat you up. So it was no surprise that the talented Bristow ended up for five years with the Groundlings. He wrote and performed sketches and monologues, gaining industry interest, but left two years ago.

"You end up repeating yourself," he says, "and I grudgingly felt it was time to move on, so I threw myself out of the company."

One of the legitimate reasons, however, was that television had come beckoning, and he was working a lot on such sitcoms as *Mad About You*, *Seinfeld*, *The Larry Sanders Show* and HBO's *Dream On*. He also enjoyed regular roles on two short-lived series: John Mendoza's *Second Half* and *Tom*, where he played Tom Arnold's boss. Then along came *Ellen* and a one-off role which expanded into a half-dozen appearances a season.

"Peter is a friend of Ellen's," he says, "gay and

out, very enthusiastic and positive—a tireless do-gooder."

Bristow was hired for his first dramatic role in the unintentionally hilarious *Showgirls* last year: "On the set I knew there was trouble with the script, but I didn't know to what extent until I was at the premiere. Andy and I were holding hands and were almost breaking each others' fingers, and my jaw dropped nearly into my lap during

traditions about our past gave me roots. I feel like I know my great-grandparents from the way they were kept alive in the talk about them. Plus, we have a high cultural awareness at home [his mother taught ballet and his late father was a public relations manager at Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena]. When I came out in the subsequent years, they dealt with my sexuality in a loving and sometimes humorous way—I think they still find



Patrick Bristow (center) with Ellen DeGeneres and Jack Plotnick

some scenes."

And how has his being so open affected the writing of his character? "My being gay and out on the show is completely and matter-of-factly accepted; there've been no problems at all. I think the writers appreciate it, as it gives them permission to write 'gay-funny,' a different voice than they normally get to write for."

Bristow certainly feels his Irish background has helped in his acceptance by his family. "Even though my family came over here three generations ago and we no longer have a formal connection to Ireland, still the music, stories and oral

it fun and interesting."

While espousing the standard line in Hollywood against casual outing, he feels strongly that such decisions are intensely personal: "It was easier for me as I had been so accepted by family and friends. And people respect you when you put it out there, saying, 'This is the way it is; the cards will fall as they do.' I never attempted to hide it at the Groundlings, and audiences responded positively, which gave me a lot of reinforcement. Although there is no doubt being out has closed some [industry] doors to me."

He illustrates with a story that, early in his

career, he was working with a nongay actor who was starring in the vehicle. "I was playing a straight part and the actor gave me notes about what I was not quite doing. I listened—he was straight, after all—but he went too far and made an inappropriate joke about my being gay. I immediately called him on it, and he ate some humble pie. That was a scary look at homophobia, but I became stronger by taking him to task."

For Bristow, who is only one of a handful of gay or lesbian actors willing to be upfront about their sexuality, "Gays in America are still considered a liability to projects by scared executives. Their fears may not be without basis, but they are without moral justification in my mind. We won't get anywhere by catering to what they perceive Americans will be comfortable with."

Getting philosophical, Bristow further explains his thinking: "Americans are adaptive as a people. If all the gays came out at once, audiences would be shocked and surprised but within a week they would be over it. Certainly the Puritan vein running through this country creates a climate of fear and shame. And is it changing? I'm no fortune teller, but as I look at the existing trend, the gay rights movement is still in full swing; the tragedy of AIDS hasn't stopped us, but has galvanized us instead. If we can withstand that, and still be cohesive, we're in good shape. But we must defend each other's rights, otherwise we're just splinters. In next decade or two, we are going to see more crossover support in all directions, gays for blacks, blacks for women, and on and on."

Bristow has a new film coming up—Showtime has adapted Jonathan Tolin's disturbing take on gay genetics, *The Twilight of the Gods*. Bristow plays a co-worker of Susanne (Jennifer Beals), the sister of gay David (Brandon Fraser), who starts the play off on the path to its difficult ending. "My character functions as comic relief in the film, and my role is pivotal to Susanne coming to her decision about her unborn fetus. [Tolin's play focuses on parental homophobia: What would you do as a parent if you knew your baby was going to be born homosexual?] They've changed it so that the focus is now more on Susanne than on David, but the stakes stay high in this version. I would hope that straight America will watch it."

Never at a loss for words, Bristow cuts right to the heart of the matter: "Stereotyping or judging people by some kind of rule-of-thumb can get you into trouble; they can't address those specific scenarios which are the human condition. With my character and my looks, energy, humor and voice, I can be an out gay actor and it enhances me. Some classically handsome, well-built and tall actor would find it more difficult to be out. But they should be allowed to come out on their own. I think outing is doing damage to the gay community and to the straight community at large. You know, it would help if everyone would get into therapy—before you're allowed to get a drivers license."

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