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WILLAMETTE WEEK

THEATER

On the road again

If it's Tuesday, this must be Portland

BY MARC ACITO



Jim Corti, looking for a Laundromat

You've worked all day. You fight traffic to get to the theater on time. You open up your program for the latest Broadway touring production and you think, "What a life these actors must have." Think again.

I recently got the lowdown from out actor Jim Corti, one of the stars of the national tour of *Ragtime*, which opens Sept. 5 at Keller (formerly Civic) Auditorium.

A musical adaptation of the novel by E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* paints a panoramic portrait of three New York families—one Jewish immigrant, one upper-class WASP and one African American—in the early 1900s. As the families embark on personal voyages of self-discovery, their lives become dramatically entwined with one another and with real-life historical characters including Henry Ford, Harry Houdini, J.P. Morgan and Booker T. Washington.

Corti originated the role of Houdini on Broadway but for the past year has toured the United States playing the principal role of Jewish immigrant Tateh. I caught up with him by phone from San Diego.

"I actually prefer the touring production to the Broadway one," he says, explaining that financial considerations forced the original creative team to focus less on the "eye candy" of elaborate sets and concentrate more on making the production character-driven. "The emotional reaction is consistent across the country; this story speaks to people in a profound way."

Corti's own story is the kind every gay boy who starred in his high school musical pins false hopes on. His first gig after graduating with a theater degree from Loyola University in the early 1970s was with the prestigious American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

Shortly thereafter, he moved to New York, but instead of languishing in the usual Actor's Purgatory of waitering, he landed a role in the original cast of Hal Prince's hit revival of *Candide*. Since then, he has worked steadily and has performed in the national tours of *A Chorus Line*, Bob Fosse's *Dancin'* and the '80s revival of *Cabaret* with Joel Grey.

"I'm having the experience of my life," Corti says. "This is the kind of rich role any actor hopes to play."

Indeed, Corti says he and the entire cast of *Ragtime* feel grateful to portray such complex characters. (As opposed to, let's say, a dancing chafing dish in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.)

Corti also expresses gratitude that being open about his sexuality has not hindered getting work. Because he specializes in character roles rather than romantic leading men, he never has experienced discrimination in an industry that routinely insists gay actors closet themselves.

Watching it happen to others has made him sympathetic. "I would never judge an actor who feels he needs to play the game."

If it's Tuesday, this must be St. Louis is the story of Corti's

life on the road. He might not have been a waiter, but as an actor on tour, he spends a lot of time waiting: waiting for the plane to take off or waiting for the bus trip to end.

Although the show occasionally "sits" for a few weeks in a major city, much of the tour is made up of one-weekers—and not always in a geographically sensible way: Miami, Cleveland, Atlanta might be the schedule.

Each cast, crew and orchestra member—more than 50 altogether—must fit an entire wardrobe suitable for all seasons and climates into just two suitcases and two carry-on bags, which forces the gay boys to make the torturous decision whether to commit to black shoes and belt or brown. Necessity has forced Corti to develop a sort of Ruffled Actor Chic, if you will.

"You have to invent a way of styling yourself. In the end, you just reconcile yourself with saying, 'This is me, I'm an actor, I just pulled this outfit out of a suitcase, nice to meet ya,'" he laughs. "After all, it's only the people you work with who actually see that you're wearing the same clothes over and over."

Corti's typical day mostly involves the relentless pursuit of Laundromats, drug stores and gallon jugs of bottled water. He tries to take in the sights, but most of his time is spent resting up for the demands of performing eight shows a week.

And if maintaining a relationship while on tour is hard, then finding one is next to impossible. Corti, who is single, admits he's made sacrifices to pursue his life's work: "Most guys my age have a lot more stability...my heart is heavy sometimes that I don't have that."

But he realizes the instability of the actor's life—not just the touring but constantly embarking on the emotional journey of being someone else—has come to feel stable to him. I can hear him smiling over the phone as he says, "Y'know, I feel very blessed that this is what life has shown me."

■ *Portland Opera* presents *RAGTIME* as part of its *Best of Broadway* series Sept. 5 through 10 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. in Portland. Tickets start at \$20 from the box office, (503) 241-1802, or Ticketmaster.

MARC ACITO used to tour as a professional opera singer. He now owns brown shoes and belts as well as black ones.

