

CABARET SCENES

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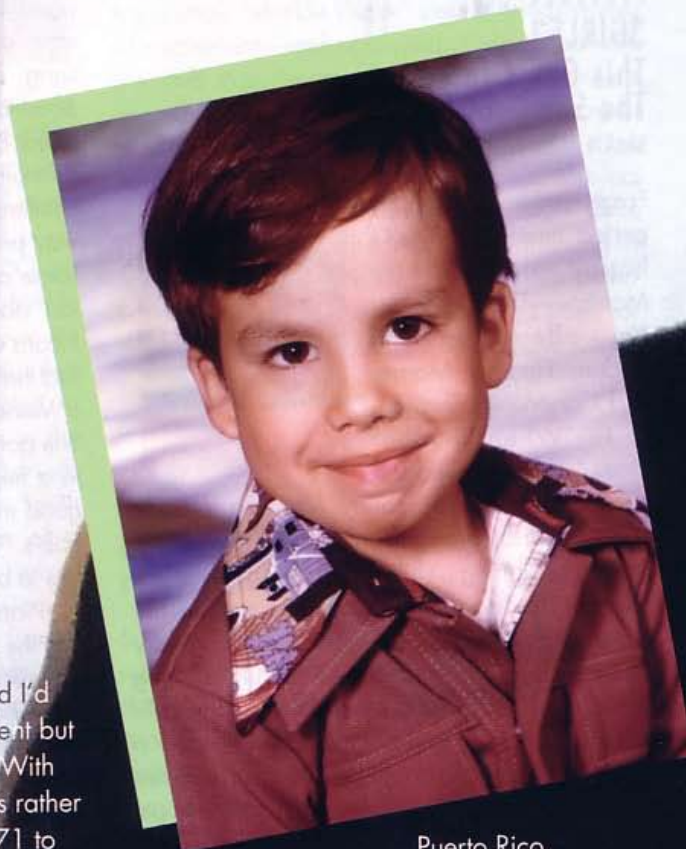
Hector Coris

Coloring Inside The Lines

By **Barbara Leavy**



When I was younger, no one would have suspected I'd end up on a stage. I was a good student but very rarely colored outside the lines." With these words Hector Coris describes his rather conventional background. Born in 1971 to parents who took no part in the hippie lifestyle or counter-cultural ideologies of the time, he attended a Catholic elementary school. He contrasts his home environment with what he takes to be that of typical cabaret performers. His parents did not fill their Jamaica, Queens house with Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, or big band music. Family outings were likely to be weekend camping trips or visits to family in



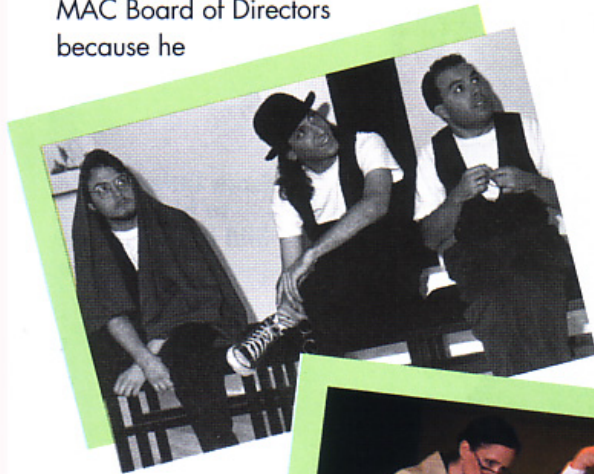
Puerto Rico, and there was no exposure to Broadway shows. But like many middle-class children, Hector did get piano lessons. These proved useful after movie scores inspired his love for music and he was able to pick out the tunes on the piano.

As a young adult, Hector's conservative background continued to have its effect. Even when he came out as a gay man, his



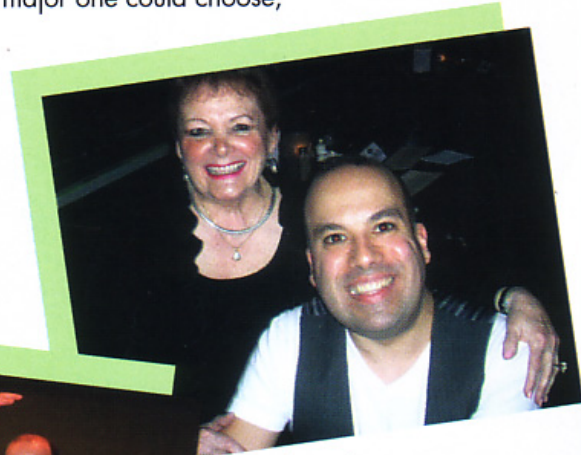
**From little Hector
to big Hector:
Still in line to get
out of line**

ultimate commitment was to a partner (they have been together since 1996), not to a rebellious, anti-establishment way of life. As he says, "I do not immerse myself in all the 'trappings' of [gay] culture. I'm still a bit of a bystander." It is not that he does not recognize the need for change in many areas of life, nor that he is reluctant to participate in working toward such change, but that he is not a political or social activist. He ran for the MAC Board of Directors because he



stage (admittedly, the shows were spoofs).

Call it the unconscious or whatever else may account for it, Hector Coris the artist was also waiting to come out. His career goals were not defined by such fields as accounting, law, or business administration; rather, Hector enrolled in the High School of Art & Design, where he majored in illustration. When he entered Queens College, he was a film major, which he describes "as perhaps the most introverted major one could choose,"



thought he could make a positive contribution to the organization. "I didn't have deep personal ties to anyone or any one faction of the community. It wouldn't be a 'personal' thing at all.

Catherine Stelly

Having been involved with several community theaters, I saw how insular, excluding, and self-serving some people could be. By adhering to my bystander stance, I never got involved in the drama, backbiting, and nonsense. I still don't." There is some irony in the fact that this essentially conventional young man played such roles as O.J. Simpson, one of the Menendez brothers, and Tonya Harding when he began to appear on



describing how "it's just you and the movie screen in a dark room." Needing two credits as part of the requirements for graduation, Hector enrolled in Acting 101. He must have impressed his classmates, for one of them dragged him to an audition for a role in *Wonderful Town*, which was to be performed at a local community theater. Until then,

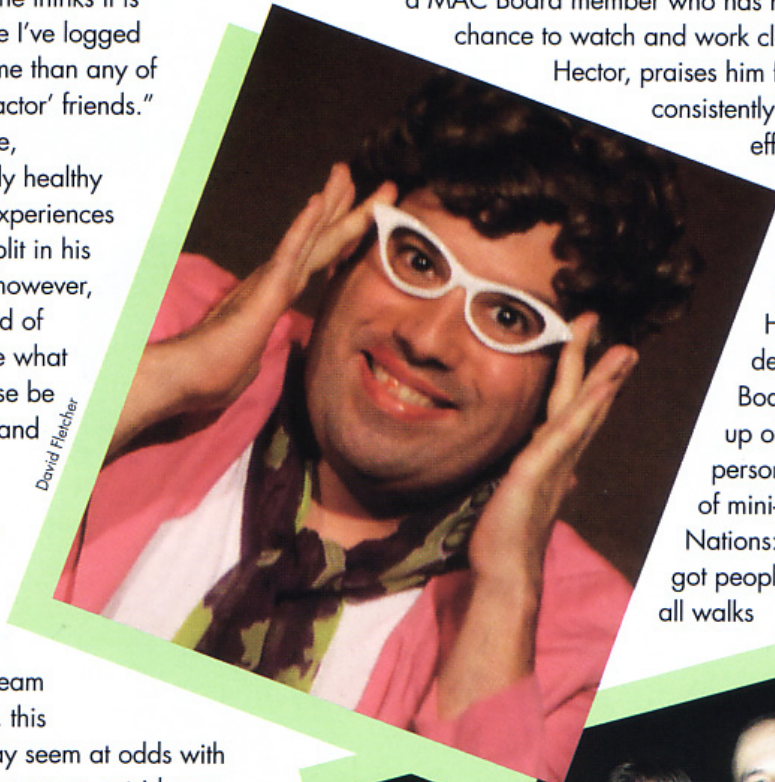
Hector did not even know he could sing, and does not remember how he chose his two audition songs, "Beautiful, Beautiful World" and "Anyone Can Whistle." But he loved being in the show and became what he calls a "major consumer of musical cast albums."

Recognizing a significant antithesis in his life between adherence to convention and a profession that always has something of the

counter-culture about it, Hector says of a day job that he needs the paycheck to feed his body, but that it is live performance that feeds his soul. And he thinks it is "quite possible I've logged more stage time than any of my 'working actor' friends."

Any self-aware, psychologically healthy person who experiences an essential split in his life style will, however, seek some kind of bridge to unite what might otherwise be contradictory and tension-producing forces. Hector does this by being a dedicated and effective team player. At first, this description may seem at odds with his self-definition as an outsider or

David Fletcher



These pages (from left) Ian Moore Asef Ronen and Hector Coris in a Queens College improv show

Fade Out-Fade In with Jean McCormick Coris with Trudi Mann

Makeup! HC runs Around the World in a Bad Mood

What's the Point?! with Collette Black Eadie Scott, Patrick Garrigan and Hector

bystander, reluctant to jump on ideological bandwagons or get involved in internecine warfare. But Hector does not reject personal involvement in issues or with other people. Rather, what he rejects is a self-serving egotism that would

encourage him to unite only with those who share his point of view and are ready to ride roughshod over those who do not. To the contrary, Hector loves to be involved with

others, working toward shared goals, cooperating with the group to improve situations that need correction. Ruth Kurtzman, a MAC Board member who has had a

chance to watch and work closely with Hector, praises him for being consistently pleasant, efficient, and

an adept multi-tasker. For his part, Hector describes the Board as made up of diverse persons, a kind of mini-United Nations: "We've got people from all walks

of our community—performers, booking managers, day-jobbers, accountants. We all have entirely different schedules, body clocks, ways of dealing with things. This could be disastrous, but we all seem to get done what we need to do." He thinks the present Board is the strongest one ever, "dedicated to improvement and making great strides as a team."



One way that Hector demonstrates his

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Hector Coris

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commitment to the profession as a whole, rather than his own career alone, is his creation of the MAC *New Faces Showcase*, which gives MAC members a chance to see “some fresh new talent who will carry the torch for us and for the art form.” And what made him happiest about being on the stage

// We’ve [MAC] got people from all walks of our community—we all have entirely different schedules, body clocks, ways of dealing with things. This could be disastrous, but we all seem to get done what we need to do. //

from his very first experiences was not the spotlight on himself but rather the cooperative effort of putting together a show: “I loved being in that show. More so than just being on stage. I loved the process of rehearsing and putting things together and working with others to create a show.” Hector describes how important it is to him to surround himself with “genuine, positive, supportive and talented people.” He adds, “I wouldn’t be able to do what I do without the counsel, advice, and camaraderie of my ‘Cabaret friends.’” And when he gets so busy that he believes he should slow down, he not only thinks of the great music and good lyrics still to be heard, but also the “many wonderful people to work with.”

As an actor, singer, songwriter (his “In Heaven They Sing Nothing But Showtunes”

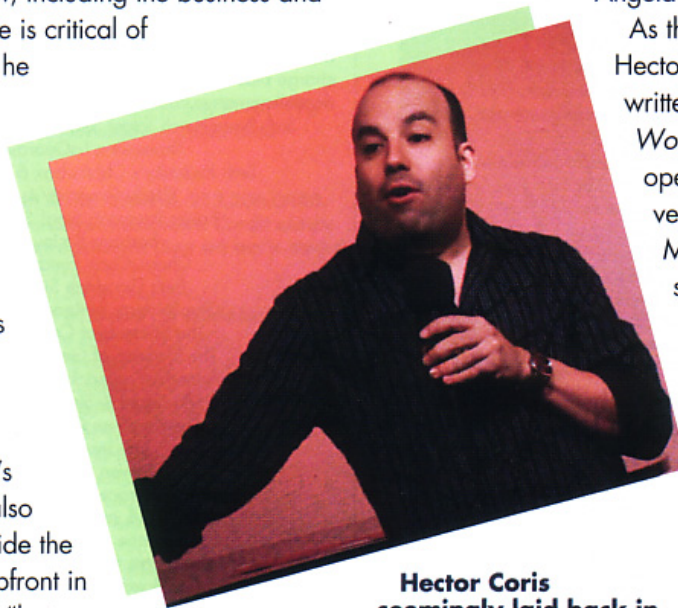
was a MAC nominee for special material), director, producer, Hector describes himself as being addicted to musical revues. He discovered in college that he had an aptitude for improvisation and with a group called Newmyn’s Nose, played on and off campus, winning improv competitions and producing their own shows. Cabaret, he says, came to him in the form of a musical revue called *The Musical Enquirer*, which played Upstairs at Rose’s Turn for close to a year, and was featured on *Entertainment Tonight* and Channel 4 news. In 2003 he wrote, with composer friend Paul L. Johnson, his first revue, *Not Me*. Another show, also written with Johnson, *What’s Your Problem?* (2004) also ran for a year and played at a festival in Montreal. Hector says he learned everything he knows about revues from Rick Crom, having been cast in Crom’s *Our Life & Times*, which “had several lives after its initial run.” There were two casts, and Hector played the same role in both, sharpening his performing skills with material that was “smart, silly, hilarious and a blast to perform.” The show “skewed current news and trends,” and its format is one that Hector aspires to keep alive.

On and off for nine years Hector has performed in Rene Foss’s *Around the World in a Bad Mood*, a spoof on airplane travel written by flight attendant Foss. And with the Opening Doors Theatre Company’s Bistro Award-winning *Closing Notice Series*, which presents full productions of short-lived Broadway musicals, Hector has directed, produced and starred in some of these wonderful productions at The Duplex.

Hector refers to the Opening Doors shows and revues as a personal addiction. But he also admits that the revue, which almost by definition is subversive, nonetheless keeps him within the lines. For despite Hector’s talent for improvisation, the players in a revue must be part of a team if the show is to work. For one thing, notes Hector, in a revue he plays a character, not himself—even if close to

himself. The opportunity for a self-indulgent monopoly of the spotlight is thereby minimized. For another, a revue is a collaborative effort and must therefore maintain some basic structure arrived at by the group if the show is not to disintegrate into formlessness. At the same time, Hector, despite his desire that "anything I'm involved with goes well, looks good, and sounds good for everyone's sake," admits he cannot at times control anything but his own performance. A self-confessed "control freak," he also wants to be involved in all aspects of putting on a show, including the business and publicity ends. He is critical of performers who, he thinks, neglect everything but the artistic side of a performance.

When asked if a revue and his concern that all aspects of production work toward the show's success doesn't also help him stay inside the lines, Hector is upfront in admitting that he "hates being on stage alone," that he finds it very stressful and lacking in the fun a revue affords him. Without quite articulating it in this way, he tells how he shrinks from the self-indulgent potential a solo show possesses. At the same time, by not doing a solo show, he has never really known who the "real" Hector Coris is, not even what his voice is capable of, because he never sang as himself. He fought against doing his own show for two years, although many ideas for it were stubbornly capturing and holding his interest. He describes how the material in *Life Is Wonderful* (which is paradoxically about death) "kept finding me." He continues,



"I found it incredibly attractive in how uncomfortable it made me feel. I felt it was time to stop coasting on the backs of characters and finally do something where I was myself." He had "found these wonderfully rich, dark, funny songs about dying, loss, rebirth by some wonderful contemporary songwriters": Susan Werner, Brett Kristofferson, David Caldwell, Ben Folds, William Finn and others. Consistent with Hector's propensity to be part of a team, he credits, even before the show opens, help from musical director Ray Bailey and director Angela Shultz.

As this feature on Hector Coris is being written, *Life Is Wonderful* is about to open at its New York venue, Don't Tell Mama. The solo show is for Hector a daring venture, another kind of "coming out," and he remains fretful about the show's patter. "The songs should speak your patter for you."

Hector Coris seemingly laid back in *Life Is Wonderful*

Hector Coris understands only too well that it is the patter that supplies the greatest temptation for a performer to submit to an egotism he has rejected throughout his career. Still, it is also clear that by emerging from the shelter of the musical revue, Hector will finally be forced to color outside the lines. ○

Editor's Note:
For more information, please visit www.hectorcotis.com