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# Neal McKenna

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## *Jumping Jack – Meet Jaco van Rensburg*

BY: Neal McKenna, November 28, 2009

Showbiz! There's nothing like it for dazzle and flash – and a lot of hard work. As glamorous as it might seem to be an actor, the reality is a far cry from the popular perception. For every hour on stage, several more have gone into rehearsals, costume fittings and makeup. And, while you and your friends are happily watching the show, the actor is working – make that working hard – to keep you entertained. So much for a social life!

Even when you are very, very good and want it so bad you can taste it, at auditions, there's no guarantee you are going to come out a winner. That's why a lot of people say: another word for "unemployed" is "actor." Still, a few have the necessary drive to pursue the dream and actually make the stage a career. Of course, there are some whose rising star is particularly fortunate and so far, this has been Jaco van Rensburg's story. "I've been very lucky," he admits. "Since I became a fulltime performer, I have never been between shows for more than three weeks. I've never struggled to find work."

At the time of the interview, van Rensburg was appearing in **CATS** in the featured role of *Mr. Mistoffelees* for which he had received rave reviews. Prior to that, he was in **Footloose**, before that, **Aspects of Love** and before that, as choreographer and resident director on **Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be**. To say the least, in the past year, he has been a busy guy!



So how keen is the competition in South Africa? "Well," he says, "there were more than 250 people auditioning for **CATS** this time around – about an eight to one ratio for available roles – so the pressure was on. But I believe hard work and a focussed attitude play vital parts in doing good auditions." Here, he waxed philosophical: "The rest I have to leave up to the muses..."

So, like everywhere else, apparently all it takes is talent, diligence, enterprising spirit and good luck to make it in South African showbiz! ...Now, begins our interview with the talented Mister van Rensburg and logically, I started at the beginning.

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**Gay Pages:** When did you realize, you wanted to pursue a career in theatre/entertainment?

**JvR:** I started dance training at age thirteen in the Namakwaland and began competing in Eisteddfods a few years later in Cape Town. Very soon I was dancing with some amazing dancers and working with the cream of South Africa's choreographers. I always loved dance as a hobby but never thought I would make a living out of it. ...I was doing very well at school and wanted to become a lawyer. Then, after matric, I decided to study Musical Theatre, just to see if there might be a career in it. I always had it in mind that I would have to study for a "real" job to have during the day if I happened to get theatre work at night, it would be a bonus. I've been very fortunate in that I haven't had to start those 'day job' studies – yet!

**GP:** How old were you when you started performing and in what kind of shows?

**JvR:** My first show was a local talent competition in Vanrhysndorp, where I went to school. I entered two numbers in the same category and won both 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> place! I also did some Dance Studio concerts in the local town hall. In 1998 I joined the Cape Youth Dance Company and performed with them at numerous South African Arts Festivals as well as the Edinburgh International Arts Festival. After my studies in 2004, at Tshwane University of Technology, I started my professional career in productions such as Pieter Toerien's *Joseph* followed by *Jesus Christ Superstar*, as well as *Chicago* and *Rent* for Hazel Feldman. A string of Civic Theatre musicals and pantomimes followed, working both on the creative/management side as well as performing.

**GP:** What established performers have influenced or inspired you most?

**JvR:** I grew up watching the Disney musicals – *Mary Poppins*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*. I was also a huge fan of the classics like *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, and so on. I never really aspired to be like anyone specific, but I do draw whatever I can from every performer I observe.

**GP:** It not only takes innate talent but a lot of training to become a professional dancer. Is "dance school" anything remotely like what we see in movies like "Fame" or "Flash Dance?"

**JvR:** In a word, no. It's mostly hard work. It was what I loved but I had to work at it like everybody else there. The lifestyle is very hectic but certainly it's never as dramatic as you see in films. It's real life and it just goes on until you've achieved your goal – that certificate. When I was studying, everything revolved around learning how to perform.

**GP:** What was your family's reaction when you informed them you wanted to be an actor rather than a lawyer?

**JvR:** Although my parents supported me wholeheartedly in my decision to make *showbiz* a career, there is most certainly a stigma around the performing arts as a profession in South Africa. I am very used to people asking me questions such as "So what else do you do for a living?" or "When are you going to get yourself a real job?"

**GP:** What are the opportunities and challenges of being a performer in South Africa?

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Jaco Van Rensburg in *Footloose*

**JvR:** In South Africa, you get to do more than one musical per year, so that's a plus. On the other side of it, we do not have anything like star-status here for theatre performers. Unfortunately, you have to be a TV soap-star in order to be well-known and I wish that would change.

**GP:** What about new projects? What's going to be keeping you busy in 2010?

**JvR:** I am again testing the waters as a producer. Right now, I am very excited to introduce three amazing girls called *The Dahlings*. They make their

theatre debut in February in a show called *Cinema Wow* at the Fringe at the Joburg Theatre. They were featured on SA's Got Talent and are ready to shake things up by bringing the sound of the 1930s and '40s into the new millennium. They are best described as the Andrews Sisters meets Beyoncé. So keep on the lookout for *The Dahlings*. ...And beyond that, I will still be doing stage work. *Grease* is my first production of the New Year.

**GP:** This is a question a lot of readers will be acutely interested in: Are you available? Is there someone special in your life? And if not, are you looking?

**JvR:** No, there's no one currently and, although I'm not looking very hard, I wouldn't say no if I did find that special someone. Meanwhile I'm blessed with amazing friends!

Gosh! He seems just about perfect! On the personal side, he's a nice fellow with loads of humility and very easy on the eye. Professionally, he's in the driver's seat – both in the limelight and behind the scenes – and he makes it all seem so easy. Wow! What a catch. And you'll find him in a theatre near you!