

» POWERPLAYERS
JOSH STRICKLAND



POWER OF THE PEEP

JOSH STRICKLAND'S FAIRYTALE IS COMING TRUE

BY CINDI R. MACIOLEK
PHOTO BY JIM K. DECKER
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Strickland stars in PEEPSHOW at Planet Hollywood, which is a show based on classic fairytales. Photo by Ethan Miller

Once upon a time, there was a young boy who had such a passion for singing he got his first microphone at five years old. His love for song led him through the jungles of Broadway to the role of Tarzan. And from there it was on to a fairytale life and show on the Las Vegas Strip.

Many people know the young boy, who is now a man, from his appearance on season two of “American Idol.” Others have seen his starring performance in Disney’s *Tarzan the Broadway Musical*. And, he’s the unmistakable co-star, with his friend, Holly Madison, in “Holly’s World.” But, most nights you’ll find Josh Strickland performing at Planet Hollywood’s PEEPSHOW, along with Madison, his leading lady.

“Singing has always been a passion. I joined a local youth group in Charleston, South Carolina, attended art school and just did my thing. Charleston is definitely different than New York or Las Vegas, but South Carolina is a place for the arts, so I wasn’t at a complete loss as to where to perform,” explained Strickland.

“You often think it will be back woods or country, but there are a lot of opportunities, including the Spoleto Festival.

“My mom was a physical education teacher and I was on the jump rope team, which taught me timing and rhythm. However, most of my experience was in musical production and singing for the church.”

After high school, Strickland tried college for a year and a half before he decided to focus on his career. He went to Los Angeles for a while and hated it, so he moved back to Charleston. He then landed a role in the touring company of *Rent*, and eventually made his way to New York.

“Everyone needs to at least try college because education is very important. In my case, I got the luck of the draw and landed my first leading role on Broadway in just a few months. I believe that for whoever has something in their heart, they have to take that jump and follow their passion.”

Like many fairytales there have been plenty of obstacles, but Strickland takes them

all in stride. “There is that certain amount of one step in front of the other. Is it a cliff? Doors will close. It’s the nature of the business. You have to try and hope it works out. The first door that shuts in your face you’re devastated. When I auditioned for “American Idol” in Atlanta, I got to go to LA, but it didn’t work out, it wasn’t for me at the time. But it was a great learning experience and all these no’s turned into a greater want.”

Strickland was working at Abercrombie and Fitch in New York, folding clothes and going for several auditions before he finally landed the role of Tarzan. “They wanted to see me sing, act and move, and to make sure I was comfortable with flying. I was unknown and they took a gamble on me. I always hope the right project comes along, but what I already did, people in their 50s are still trying to do. I don’t know if anything else will trump it.

“I worked with Phil Collins on it, and it was great to tap into what I’m good at with his music,” Strickland says of his Tarzan role. “Whenever you get to sing one of his songs, it’s magical. It’s also a beautiful story and since I’m adopted and I was trying to find my parents, it touched me deeply.”

About a year after the show closed, Strickland was still in New York when Gary Mitchell called him about a show he was putting together in Las Vegas called PEEPSHOW with Kelly Monaco and Mel B.

And, of course, every fairytale has a hero.

“I was just supposed to be there three months, but then Holly was hired. We thought she would be perfect for the show, and we became fast friends. You meet a lot of people in this business and you never know who you’re going to mesh with. We really became close. Then, when her reality show (“Holly’s World”) was green-lighted, the producers invited me to join in.

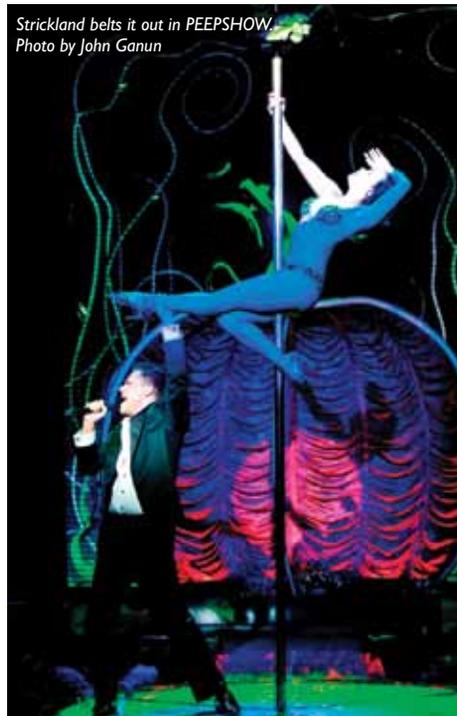
“It’s incredible, the power of TV. A big portion of the last season (of “Holly’s World”) was about me being adopted and finding my birth mother. I wasn’t searching for new parents, but an adopted child always has a want for information. You want to know if you have your mother’s eyes, your father’s hands. It had always been on my mind. It’s more about the closure than about filling an empty spot with information.

“Once you close that door, it makes you appreciate your family and the life you were given so much more. She needed to give me up,” Strickland said of his birth mother. “She

Strickland shows off his swinging skills in the Broadway production of *Tarzan*.
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Strickland belts it out in *PEEPSHOW*.
Photo by John Ganun



I'm just blessed to be able to do a job I enjoy. I'm exhausted after just one show, but sometimes we have two in one night. One thing I learned from Holly is she's a business woman and a hard worker, and you can do anything you want if you put your mind to it.

was a very strong woman, and I appreciate her for that. I'm so thankful for the friends and family and life and chances I was given. It makes you very humble and respectful of your parents, and family sometimes doesn't mean blood.

"I didn't know how many adopted people felt this way. It was such heartfelt stuff kids were pouring out to me. It gave them courage so they don't feel so alone. I just love that I'm able to be a positive role model for people."

Beyond *PEEPSHOW* and "Holly's World," Strickland just released his first solo singles, "Last Dance" and "Report to the Floor." However, it's not all about the singing when it comes to what he loves. "I want to be known as an entertainer rather than just a singer. It's everything underneath that umbrella. I'd love to do a reality show so people can see me being funny and silly but also see the

professional side. It's hard work! People have a misconception. When you're on stage for two hours, you have to give it 150 percent because it's a new group of people all the time. Every night is an opening night.

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"Music is now becoming a bigger part of TV shows, and I'm excited about it. However, nothing beats performing live. The electricity coming out of the audience is amazing! If you mess up, you have to figure out how to fix it. You're learning every single night. It's a constant battle to always be on your toes. One of my biggest fears is forgetting words. It terrifies me like just like it does Barbra

Streisand. I hope I'm not wandering when I'm singing a song. I really have to focus."

Strickland has definitely embraced and been embraced by his new hometown having recently been selected as the 2011 Las Vegas PRIDE Parade Celebrity Grand Marshall, which is in September. "Las Vegas has so much to offer – not just being in the show. There are tons of things to do here. In my spare time, I love going to Mount Charleston to hike or sled in the winter. I love going to movies by myself, having lunch with friends. It's great to have the day off and work at night. I couldn't have asked for a better schedule!"

His dressing room has a Holly Madison bobble head, lots of gummy bears to keep his voice smooth as silk, and numerous sentimental gifts and cards from opening night. "They remind me of that initial hard work that it took to get where I'm at," Strickland explained. "We're lucky to be doing this every day. So many shows close and I'm really thankful that we have a great show.

"I'd love to do film or TV, but at this moment, reality is working and it's the hot ticket. I'd love to do my own show, but we're hoping to shoot a third season of "Holly's World." I'd like to do four or five seasons then have a spinoff. I've already accomplished so many dreams, I'm excited to see where it goes from here."

And just like a fairytale, a happy ending awaits. □