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Industry Insiders: Raven O., Box Office Hit



Raven O, former host at outré burlesque haunt, The Box, moved from his hometown in Hawaii to New York after winning airfare at a dance competition. He calls his childhood in the tropics that of a “country boy.” Raven’s life in New York has had its ups and downs, but recently, things have started coming together for the eccentric performer. He’s in the recording process for his first solo album and his one-man show at the Bleecker Street Theater, “One Night With You” was such met with rave reviews. More on the superstar's crazy past after the jump.

On starting in entertainment:

I started out as an actor. When I first saw dance, I thought it was gross. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. But in my teens, I was in a school library looking for something to read. I’m part Russian and I was in this section about Russia and I grabbed a book about Rudolph Nureyev, the ballet dancer. I didn’t know what that meant, but I opened the book and there was a picture of him jumping through the air, and it was the most striking thing I’d ever seen. I borrowed the book and got caught up in his story. After I read the book I told my parents I wanted to be a ballet dancer.

On getting to New York:

I really wanted to go and my friend, Pat Briggs, wanted to come with me. I won this dance competition and the prize was a ticket to New York. I got us tickets to New York, and I never came back. I was supposed to stay with a friend, but the night that I got there I found out I couldn't stay with them anymore. I stayed with him one night and then I was homeless. I slept on floors. I'd just have to find a place to sleep. I'd sleep in cars, too. People would let me stay with them. But I did that for about a year, and it got really bad. I'd stay with people who would run out of money or who were drug addicts and they would use their money on drugs and couldn't pay rent.

On finding an alternative:

Pat was staying with a friend, but he worked at this gay bar and he would go home with guys. And he would tell me when he was taking a guy home and he'd say, "Okay, when they fall asleep, I'll let you in and you can crash on the couch. But you have to leave before they all wake up." I was only 18.

On his first job in the big city:

I was a waiter in the gay bar that my friend Patrick worked at. I was the only person of color. The owner of the bar was very racist. But the manager, he was the coolest guy ever, gave me the job. A couple weeks into the job, the owner came in and saw me working. He went over to the manager and told him to fire me. I was a good waiter, so the manager was confused. He was like, "It was the request of the owner." And I was like, "Who's the owner?" and he showed me the owner and I went up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and I pushed him up against the wall and I was like, "You got a fucking problem with me?" and he was like, "You can stay. I like this kid." So from then on, he was like, "This kid stays."

On returning to The Box:

It was a great time, but as a performer I want to do different things. I would do special events for them, but that's about it.

On his past vices:

I used to be really into drugs. I did cocaine; I was a crack addict. There was a three-year period that was all crack/cocaine usage. I've done everything. Every kind of drug. With alcohol, it makes me sick. I've never liked smoking. Now I just live a healthy life.

On eventually opening his own place:

I'd be involved at a creative level, but having my own place just doesn't appeal to me. It's a lot of work. I get my greatest joy from being on stage. Family, friends make me happy, but the only other thing I care about is performing. Making people laugh, cry. It's my way of keeping safe. I keep everything in, but when I perform I let it all out.

Go-to places:

My favorite restaurant is Elmo on Seventh Avenue, La Mela in Little Italy, Indochine. The "F-Word Party" at Rebel on Friday nights is really fun. Barracuda has a really funny drag show.

By **Eiseley Tauginas**