



Mapa, Alec (b. 1965)

by Linda Rapp

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Alec Mapa has enjoyed success as an actor and on the comedy circuit. He is also an activist for glbtq rights.

The son of immigrants from the Philippines, Mapa was born on July 10, 1965 and, as he told Chay Yew in a 2003 interview in *The Advocate*, "was originally named Alejandro after Alexander the Great, an ancient Macedonian homosexual with a penchant for world domination."

The conqueror's sexual orientation was clearly not uppermost in the minds of Mapa's parents, however; theirs was a conservative Catholic home in which Mapa learned at an early age that any behavior outside the heteronormative was unacceptable.

At school he was taunted by other students but tried to win acceptance by playing the comedian. To cope with the pain of the situation, he began taking drugs.

Nevertheless, in high school Mapa found "a gay and lesbian support group" in the form of the drama club, which he "loved . . . because it was full of misfits."

Through his drama studies, he also met a teacher who recognized his ability and potential for success. The teacher issued Mapa an ultimatum that he stop "throwing it all away" through his drug use and poor academic performance.

"Her words yanked me off a ledge," wrote Mapa. He set his sights on college and, despite poor early grades in high school, managed to get accepted to New York University to prepare for a career in acting, a daunting challenge for any aspiring performer, but even more so for a member of an under-represented minority.

Mapa recalled that the only Asian-American actors that he had seen on television were Victor Sen Yung, portraying the ranch cook Hop Sing on the western series *Bonanza*, and George Takei, who played Mr. Sulu on the cult hit *Star Trek* and who would, many years later, come out as a gay man and become an articulate spokesperson for glbtq rights.

Mapa's experience while in the university could have discouraged him. He had relatively few opportunities to appear in productions because of his ethnicity. Some people advised him that being open about his homosexuality could also hinder his career, but, as he recalled in a 2001 interview with Alonso Duralde of *The Advocate*, his response was "Why? I'm not going to get to read for all those really good roles they're writing for heterosexual Asian males under 5 foot 5?"

After his graduation from college, Mapa found work in stand-up comedy, opening for lesbian performer Lea DeLaria. "Gay comedy was in its infancy; there were so few gay comics," he told Loren King of the *Provincetown Banner*. "I was so freaked out, but Lea pushed me onstage and then she took me to P'town. It



Alec Mapa in 2008.
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was like being thrown into the deep end of the pool. She was a great mentor to me."

Mapa continued to pursue acting opportunities and landed small parts in Alan Alda's *A New Life* and James Bridges' *Bright Lights, Big City*, both of which were released in 1988.

The same year Mapa made his Broadway debut in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. His was a minor role, but he also understudied B. D. Wong, who starred as Song Liling, a male Chinese spy who poses as a woman and becomes the lover of a French diplomat.

Toward the end of the play's two-year run on Broadway, Mapa replaced Wong, and he continued in the role of Song Liling in a national tour of the play, earning excellent reviews for his performances. Patti Hartigan of the *Boston Globe* praised him for his understanding of the psyches of both Song Liling and his/her lover and for "displaying all the subtle nuances of the ideal female perceived by . . . [the lover] Gallimard."

Mapa returned to the New York stage in a 1995 Public Theater production of Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*, which explores both romantic relationships in the time of AIDS and the place of ethnic minorities in the larger gay community. Reviewer Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* gave Mapa high marks for his portrayal of a flamboyant Filipino student at Harvard.

Meanwhile, Mapa had been attempting to develop a career in television, but because of the paucity of roles for Asian actors, he managed to land only a handful of jobs on single episodes of television series during the late 1990s.

Out of money, Mapa took matters into his own hands. As he told Tim Parks of the *Gay & Lesbian Times*, he decided that "if no one is going to give me a job, I'll make one for myself." Turning adversity into advantage, he developed a one-man comedy show entitled "I Remember Mapa" about growing up as a gay Filipino American and struggling to find work as an actor.

Mapa's wit and exuberance delighted audiences and critics alike. He won *LA Weekly's* award for Best Solo Show, and television producers began to give him more serious consideration.

Mapa's first job as a regular cast member on a television series came in 2001. The CBS sitcom, *Some of My Best Friends*, on which Mapa broke new ground by playing the first gay Asian regular character on television, lasted only eight episodes but led to other opportunities, including recurring roles on *Half & Half* (UPN, 2003-2006) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2005-2007).

In 2007 Mapa joined the cast of *Ugly Betty*, an ABC sitcom set in the publishing house of a fashion magazine and frequently described as the queerest show on network television. Mapa quickly became a fan favorite in his recurring role as Suzuki St. Pierre, the nasty host of a television show called Fashion Buzz.

Mapa has hosted two very different television shows himself. *Transamerican Love Story* (LOGO, 2008) was a dating show featuring transgender people. Mapa was pleased by the tenor of the program. "I didn't want to do something that was creepy and Jerry Springer-y," he told journalist Parks, and so he was glad that "it turned out to be an extraordinarily kind and funny, sweet show."

On Animal Planet's *Dancing with Dogs* (2008), Mapa hosted an international "canine freestyle" competition in which people and their dogs performed creative and intricately choreographed routines together. A dog owner himself, Mapa enjoyed seeing the affection and interaction between the human and canine dancers.

Mapa also made a comedy special, *Wisecrack*, for LOGO. First aired in 2005, it has proven popular with viewers and has been rebroadcast numerous times.

LOGO also broadcast his comedy special, *Alec Mapa: No Fats, Femmes or Asians* (2009), which revisits his

experience growing up gay in a Catholic Filipino family as well as his life on the dating scene.

Mapa has continued his film career as well, playing gay characters in David Frankel's *Marley & Me* and Dennis Dugan's *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (both 2008). He also had a part as a high school teacher in Stewart Wade's gay-themed *Tru Loved* (2008).

In addition to writing the material for his comedy shows, Mapa has penned a column for *The Advocate* since 2003. His subjects may be personal or of general cultural interest, on amusing or serious topics, but they consistently reflect both his wit and his deep commitment to the cause of glbtq rights.

Mapa devotes enormous amounts of time to fundraising for worthy organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services, AIDS Project Los Angeles, the Trevor Project, and Lambda Legal.

Of particular importance to him is the Matthew Shepherd Foundation. He has served on the Foundation's advisory board; and has expressed great admiration for Judy Shepherd, Matthew's mother, who has been tireless in her efforts to combat homophobia and support legislation to allow the prosecution of hate crimes against glbtq people.

He is a recipient of GLAAD's Davidson Valentini Award for promoting equal rights for the glbtq community.

Mapa and Jamison ("Jamie") Hebert have been a couple since 2002. They registered as domestic partners in California in 2005, and were married in 2008 before the passage of Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in the state. The couple resides in Los Angeles.

Following his marriage, the domesticated Mapa expressed neither regret nor fear of aging, telling Stephen Lang: "I'm 43. I know I'm supposed to be all weird about aging, but I'm not. I partied like a beast for years. It's a miracle I'm alive and I'm grateful. My twenties were filled with nonstop drama--horrible boyfriends, financial ruin, etc. I didn't like myself very much. I spent my 30's cleaning up the mess I made in my 20's. Now I'm married, have two dogs, and I love my husband as well as my work. I would never trade 43 for who I was at 23."

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