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# The ballad of John and Tony

**John Tartaglia, the adorable star of the Tony-bound *Avenue Q*, talks about the second job he's taken on since coming out: ambassador of gay understanding** **By Michael Giltz**

**F**or star John Tartaglia, coming out in *The Advocate* right before his first musical, *Avenue Q*, opened on Broadway—to the best reviews of any musical this season—turned out to be both no big deal and the smartest thing he ever did.

“When I first did the article for *The Advocate*,” says 26-year-old Tartaglia, “I was really nervous because, well, I’m

not really a name at all. I don’t have any exposure. This is my first national magazine. What if I hurt my career? And the funny thing is, it’s helped me more than anything else.”

Indeed, he and the *Avenue Q* puppet Rod—who’s a closeted gay Republican—have become ambassadors not just for the word-of-mouth hit about puppets and people starting out in life

on New York’s lower east side but also for the gay community at large. With *Avenue Q* a favorite to earn a passel of Tony nominations on May 10, that popularity is only likely to increase.

Tartaglia and Rod have appeared on *Hollywood Squares* and in a solo spotlight for the actor at the Ars Nova Broadway Spotlight series. Tartaglia has also been asked to host or appear in events like the Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS benefit, the Broadway Bares show, the Easter Bonnet benefit, New Faces of Broadway at Carnegie Hall (with costar Stephanie D’Abruzzo), the local Emmys, and even a Neil Sedaka tribute.

Job offers for voice-over work in animation and possible movie and TV deals have also been forthcoming, though after a year Tartaglia is having such fun performing in *Avenue Q*, both off-Broadway and on, that he’s not ready to walk away yet.

*Avenue Q*’s good karma has also rubbed off on the show’s director, Jason Moore—who is also out and has been deluged with offers, including a starry Broadway revival of *Steel Magnolias* in the fall, a TV movie musical version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with out producers Craig Zadan and Neil Meron (*The Reagans*, *Chicago*), and a series development deal with Fox.

The 33-year-old director says it’s been a trippy delight seeing Tartaglia and Rod become so popular.

“Seeing Rod on CNN,” says Moore, “that was one of my favorite moments, especially when the ticker read [the name of the character] ‘Mrs. Thistletwat.’” Tartaglia was already attached to the project when Moore joined, but the director quickly saw how special his affable star was.

“He’s an exceptionally, especially talented kid,” says Moore. “That’s why he can carry the show. I’m just thrilled people are recognizing him for all he has to offer.”

*Avenue Q* has certainly proved to be a desirable address for its star.

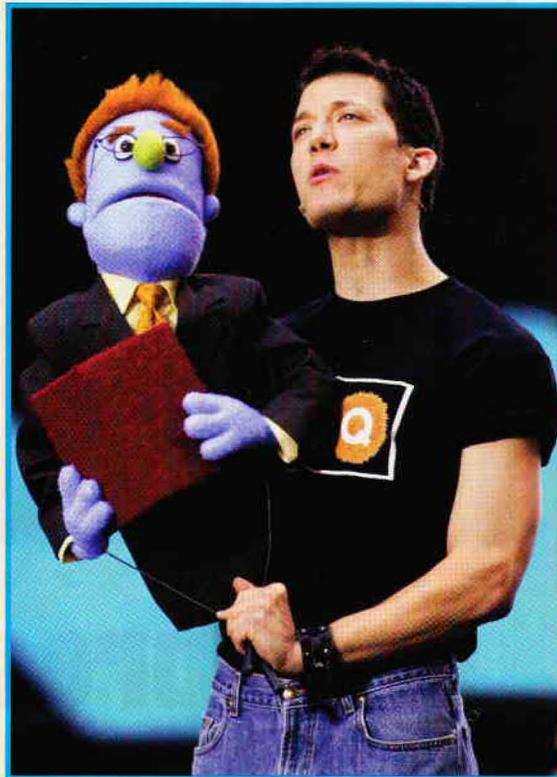
“It’s opened a lot of doors for me,” says Tartaglia. “A year and a half ago I was walking down Broadway and looking up at the theaters and thinking, *Oh, my God, that’s my dream to be there*. I was just praying that someday I’d get to walk through the stage door and work at a Broadway theater.”

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As he points out, the puppets make this show one of the few where the characters make sense outside of the show. (You wouldn't want Mama Rose hosting an awards event, would you?) And the popularity of Rod in particular is no surprise to Tartaglia.

"Rod's story line appeals so much to people," he says. "Not only is he such a sweet and sympathetic character, but even if you have no experience with gay people at all, you can still relate to him. Everyone has a part of themselves they struggle to be honest about."

Together, the relaxed gay leading man and the anxious gay puppet on his sleeve send a powerful message about the rewards of being out. And Tartaglia takes every opportunity to communicate that message in person. One of his favorite appearances was True Colors, a weekend retreat for gay and les-



Tartaglia with gay *Avenue Q* puppet Rod: changing hearts and minds

bian kids and their families and friends in Connecticut.

"Being up in Connecticut was really a wake-up call," says Tartaglia. "Here I am in my 20s worried about being open, and here are these kids who are, like, 14 and saying, 'Yeah, I'm gay.' It was really amazing. There were about 1,500 kids and their families or friends. [I walked] through this college campus and saw all these kids who are 13 to 21, and if they're not out, they're questioning. And it was just joy. There were no kids being harassed because they were different. No one was left out. It was very emotional for me because of how beautiful it is that it exists."

Here's hoping that Tartaglia and Rod have another emotional moment on June 10, when the Tony awards are handed out. ■

*Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.*