



Profile

STAR 94

Sex star Joey Stefano's death from a heroin overdose spotlights an uneasy connection between drug abuse and the pornography industry



By Fred Goss

On the night of December 5, 1994, the great and the not-so-great of the gay-porn industry gathered at the Palace in Hollywood for the presentation of the Third Annual Gay Erotic Video Awards. A benefit for Aid for AIDS, the show was mostly a celebration of shameless excess. But one moment transcended the tawdry glamour of the event: a video tribute to the late Nicholas Anthony Iacona Jr., known to porn audiences across the country as Joey Stefano.

After a short, emotional eulogy from Iacona's longtime friend Chi Chi LaRue—the adult-movie director on whose set the performer had been due the morning he was found near death from an apparent heroin overdose—a screen descended from the proscenium. On it appeared video images of the late actor, who died at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center on November 21, just five weeks shy of his 27th birthday. The montage of close-ups of Iacona captured something of his mercurial charm: a face quick to register joyous ecstasy or weary cynicism, boyish delight or bitchy scorn—the face, ultimately, of a young man who had perhaps seen too much of the seamier side of life yet still could display flashes of dazzling beauty and childlike innocence.

Beneath the fresh facade, however, lurked an ugly truth: Iacona had been struggling with addiction—abusing such hard drugs as heroin, crystal meth, and ketamine (known on the street as Special K) since his mid teens. And in light of the July 1994 suicide of Shannon Wilsey—the porn actress known as Savannah, who shot herself after injuring her face in an auto accident and who was widely known to have drug-abuse problems—it is tempting to draw parallels between the two performers and to look for ways to lay the blame at the feet of the very industry that catapulted these two to stardom.

LaRue, generally credited with giving Iacona his start, disputes the idea, though, that the porn industry contributed to Iacona's death—or Wilsey's. Says LaRue: "Shannon and Nick were troubled people way before they got

into this industry. Nick had been addicted to drugs since he was 16, though when I met him he had been clean and sober three years." But his sobriety was short-lived. "It was 'I'm clean and sober' one day," says LaRue. "The next, I'm doing a ton of Special K; I can barely move."

Dave Kinnick, editor of *Adam Gay Video 1994 Directory* and an award-winning porn cinematographer, agrees that the industry itself isn't to blame for performers' drug problems: "Based on my preconceived notions of what I would see on the porn sets—this is going back to 1986—I saw shockingly little evidence of drug use.

"This is not to say certain models didn't have drugs," Kinnick adds. "I know Iacona was doing drugs on the set of *Masquerade*, the last film we worked on together. I'm quite sure the director was unaware of it—he was a first-time director—but Nick would go to the bathroom every 15 or 20 minutes, and he'd come back each time incrementally sketchier. By the time we were ready to film his come shot, he was incoherent."

Director Gino Colbert, himself a former porn actor and another longtime Iacona friend, has a much darker view of the industry's culpability. "On my set, drugs are not allowed," he says. "But I've seen other directors offer drugs to innocent people, right on the set. I know directors who are major substance abusers and who don't bother to hide it. I had one actor tell me not long ago that he was on the set when another actor was snorting crystal; the director did nothing about it."

Veteran porn producer William Margold, a spokesman for the Free Speech Coalition, says that "it depends on what drug you're talking about" when asked if drug abuse is rampant on porn sets. Among the female performers in straight porn, he says, "there is a lot of peer pressure to abuse drugs, particularly crystal meth and cocaine. I've never seen

anybody shooting heroin, but that may be because you never know what the camera is going to show—for example, needle tracks." The male performers, Margold says, "do a lot of marijuana, but that's about it."

Sources agree that abusing drugs such as coke, crystal, and heroin—known erectile inhibitors—is counterproductive for male porn actors. Says Kinnick: "There's a big difference between a good sexual performance in your own bed and one in front of a camera and crew, which requires the ability to focus and perform over long periods of time."

That seems obvious, but what happens when the lights go off and the cameras shut down? "I think drugs on the set are most likely frowned upon," suggests Pat Califia, a noted authority on gay sexual mores and author of *The Advocate Adviser*, among other books, "but that doesn't mean the actors don't party hard after the shoot. You have a lifestyle created where there's all that money coming in and a lot of peer pressure to keep up the image that you are a wild kind of free-for-all person living life on the edge."

Perhaps too the emphasis on always needing to look beautiful pushes those performers who have a predisposition to substance abuse into full-blown addiction. Says Colbert: "I know so many gorgeous people who enter this industry and who fall under pressure to maintain their looks and end up on drugs. Porn's an easy way to make money, so for a while they can support their drug habits; then they become spoiled."

LaRue concurs—in part: "Anybody who gets into the business is, I think, a little insecure. They need that constant reassurance they get in front of the camera: 'Oh, you look good!' People get into the business for different reasons, but I haven't known many who did so to support their drug habit. If I found out somebody working for me was doing it to sup-

port a drug habit, they'd be gone. I won't have anyone high on my set. Addictive personalities are there long before they enter the industry. They come into the business screaming for attention, and they get a lot of it."

Blaming drug abuse on the porn industry reflects an invidious stereotype, says Margold: "Mainstream society will always try to 'bury' the porn industry with AIDS or with a needle in its vein. Yes, drugs exist in the porn industry, but not to the extent mainstream society thinks. I'm sorry Joey Stefano died, but I think his death has as many parallels to River Phoenix's as it does to Savannah's—if not, in fact, more."

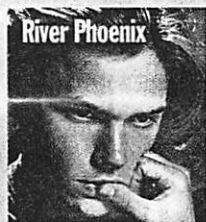
In the end we may never know what propelled Nick Iacona to such lethal excesses of drug abuse—just as we may never know what drove Shannon Wilsey to put a bullet in her brain or, for that matter, what brought River Phoenix to his untimely end on the sidewalk in front of the Viper Club on the Sunset Strip. One truth, however, stands clear: All three performers died at a shockingly young age.

In the few minutes it took for Iacona's video tribute to unfold at the Gay Erotic Video Awards ceremony, the tragic loss of a vibrant life force seemed overwhelming. Here, after all, was one of the industry's brightest stars, whose popularity with fans was matched only by that of Jeff Stryker and Ryan Idol. And, as the only member of that trio who was openly gay, Iacona occupied a special place in the hearts of his truly adoring public. His superstar status was testament to his appeal, considering Iacona was a bottom, or receptive partner, in an industry that traditionally prizes only tops. Bottoms are more or less cannon fodder in gay porn, but Iacona had that indefinable something called star quality, enough so that Madonna pursued him to appear in her book *Sex*.

Much has been made of the death of Joey Stefano, but countless other deaths in the porn world have left scarcely a ripple in the public consciousness. Whether media events or inglorious passings, these deaths defy complacent and facile explanations. And that's what really hurts.

With additional reporting by Jamoo

Live fast, die young



The film star died in 1993 of a drug overdose.



The porn star died in July of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.