

The Fruits of Fierstein's Fame

by Steve Warren

Playwright/actor Harvey Fierstein once went through a 2½-year period of voluntary celibacy. "It was great — I got so much work done!" he half-jokes, beginning a story that must someday find its way into a play.

It didn't begin by choice. "What happened was, I didn't have enough money to take a subway into Manhattan (from Brooklyn) to get laid; so that created a situation of celibacy. And if I did have the 75 cents to get into Manhattan I didn't have the dollar to buy the beer to stand in the bar and they would throw me out."

Then the struggles to get *Torch Song Trilogy* staged without compromise paid off, providing a modest but steady income. After winning Tony awards for Best Play and Best Actor in 1983 (along with several other lesser-known awards), that income has multiplied with the addition of a national touring company, a London company. The show also also played or is playing in the Netherlands, Spain, Australia, Mexico, South Africa, Brazil and other countries.

The national company of *Torch Song Trilogy* opened in San Francisco in July, 1983 for a limited run of seven weeks, which was then extended to a 19 week engagement. This was followed by a six month engagement in Los Angeles. During the San Francisco run, Fierstein held a press conference — which provided this reporter with the opportunity to interview him.

When *Torch Song Trilogy* becomes the inevitable "major motion picture" in the spring of 1985, Fierstein says, "I'll write it and probably star and maybe even produce." It will be an independent production so he can retain control and keep his 3½ hour play from being cut.

While *Torch Song* was working its way to Broadway and trying to build an audience there, Fierstein's talent was recognized by Allan Carr, the flamboyant film producer (*Grease*, *Can't Stop the Music*) who owned the American stage rights to *La Cage aux Folles* and had been trying for years to mount a musical version.

Like Yenta the Matchmaker on a good day, Carr brought together Fierstein (book), Jerry Herman (songs) and Arthur Laurents (direction) and turned them loose on Jean Poiret's original French script. Fierstein says Carr never bothered them until they had completed the first act. When they read that

for him he loved it and let them finish the show without interference.

Not expecting to like it, Fierstein had avoided seeing the movie. Now he says he would never have accepted the assignment if he had seen it. When he finally did, after his own script was completed, he was so upset by Albin's self-hatred, he says, "I went home and called Arthur Laurents at like three in the morning and said, *La Cage aux Folles* the play will have to run 20 years to sold-out houses to undo the damage that *La Cage aux Folles* the movie is doing."

While he didn't derive the satisfaction from adapting someone else's work that he gets from creating something himself, Fierstein enjoyed the collaborative process: "The three of us worked day and night together. I loved that relationship and had a ball doing it and I now have two closest friends in the world...but as far as artistic satisfaction it's a little bit better to go home and jerk off."

As for George Hearn and Gene Barry, who play the leads in *La Cage aux Folles*, announcing their heterosexuality in every interview, Fierstein believes "that the press went out for that angle." He's pleased that Hearn finally tired of it and "said the other day, 'I'm not letting anybody say I'm heterosexual anymore.'"

He wouldn't insist on a gay actor playing the lead in the film version of *Torch Song Trilogy*, Fierstein says, denying that he rejected Richard Dreyfuss for that reason; "I just think that when it comes to playing *Torch Song*, that it's a hell of a lot easier to play it if you're gay...."

"If I play it I'll have to turn gay!"

Because Fierstein created the role of Arnold Beckoff for himself, it's widely assumed that the play is autobiographical. He says this isn't true — "anymore than *A Streetcar Named Desire* is autobiographical." A lover did leave Harvey for a woman, but he didn't come back as Arnold does. Nor did Harvey ever have a lover who was killed by fag bashers. And the mother, he says, is not his mother, though he thinks any gay man will relate to their confrontation.

It becomes apparent at the San Francisco press conference — the first he'd ever held, incidentally — that the most recognizable part of Fierstein in *Torch Song Trilogy* is his philosophy — an extremely conservative one favoring committed relationships and even a gay version of the nuclear family.

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A moment of confrontation from the final section of *Torch Song Trilogy*.

Background:

Torch Song Trilogy is actually three plays — *International Stud*, *Fugue in a Nursery*, and *Widows and Children First* — presented as a single evening's entertainment. Together, they chronicle the life of Arnold Beckhoff — a gay man who wants what everyone wants in life — a job he doesn't hate too much, enough money to live comfortably, and someone to share it with.

Along the way, he works as a female impersonator in a gay club, has a stormy affair with a befuddled bisexual who leaves him for a woman, tries to adopt a delinquent gay street kid and squares off against his classic Jewish mother.

"What's nice about Arnold," says playwright Harvey Fierstein, "is that he's struggling to be truthful. Not many people do. At the beginning, we meet him in full drag, and at the end he's naked, so to speak."

"I've written a play in which homosexuals don't commit suicide at the end or repent their evil ways. The basic theme is self-respect, the realization that homosexuals can be just a moral as heterosexuals."

John Glines, one of the original co-producers, adds that *Torch Song* is "really very conservative, in a way. Arnold Beckhoff want what most people want. He's very middle-class. He wants a family life. He even says that, when he's talking about how his mother doesn't understand him; he says, 'What I want is her life — with a few minor alterations.' What Harvey proved was that you could use a gay context and a gay experience and speak in universal truths."

Fierstein told his parents he was gay when he was 13, and the revelation was not particularly traumatic. "There was no crying or screaming in my presence," he told *Time*, "I was what I was, and it wasn't a family decision."

He told *Newsweek* that he doesn't see his play as a political statement about gays. "That's not what I think about because I never look for anyone's approval or permission. I just do what I want to do."

Torch Song Trilogy will be at Duke University's Page Auditorium on Monday & Tuesday, December 3 and 4.

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