



Fierstein, Harvey (b. 1954)

by Linda Rapp

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A publicity photograph of Harvey Fierstein provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

Gravel-voiced actor Harvey Fierstein has had phenomenal success as both a performer and a playwright, earning many awards and accolades. He has also been recognized for his steadfast commitment to the cause of glbtq rights.

The younger of two sons of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, Harvey Forbes Fierstein was born on June 6, 1954 in Brooklyn, New York. His parents and brother were extremely supportive of him when he came out to them at the age of thirteen.

The Fiersteins encouraged their sons to attend cultural events in New York City. Saturday matinees on Broadway were a favorite. Young Harvey Fierstein developed an act of his own, dressing in drag and belting out Ethel Merman songs. At sixteen he began his career as a female impersonator at a gay club in Manhattan's East Village.

As a result of his club act Fierstein was offered a role in a 1971 production of Andy Warhol's play *Pork* at the La MaMa Experimental Theater Club.

Fierstein continued to appear at La MaMa and other venues but also, having some aspirations to become a painter, enrolled at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He received a B.F.A. degree from Pratt in 1973.

Rather than pursuing a career in painting, Fierstein turned to playwriting. Several of his early "raunchy chic" works were produced off-off-Broadway, and the New York Theater Ensemble staged his *Flatbush Tosca*, a drag interpretation of Puccini's opera, in 1975.

The following year Fierstein became dangerously depressed after breaking up with a lover. His therapist recommended that he write about the experience, and the result was *The International Stud*, which was produced at the Theater for the New City in 1976 and at La MaMa in 1978, both times with Fierstein in the leading role of Arnold Beckoff, a gay man whose bisexual lover jilts him for a woman.

Critical reaction was not particularly enthusiastic, but Fierstein went on to write two more plays about Arnold, *Fugue in a Nursery* and *Widows and Children First!*. Both premiered at La MaMa in 1979, with Fierstein again playing the lead. *Fugue in a Nursery* subsequently moved to an off-Broadway venue.

Backed by The Glines, a non-profit corporation devoted to sponsoring gay-themed cultural works, Fierstein crafted the three Arnold plays into a single show, entitled *Torch Song Trilogy*, which was first presented off-off-Broadway at the Richard Allen Center in 1981.

Critic Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* had dismissed *The International Stud* as "a sincere but sentimentalized view of a transvestite in extremis," but he joined the chorus of praise for *Torch Song Trilogy*. He wrote that "Arnold's story becomes richer as it unfolds," and of Fierstein's performance he stated that his "self-incarnation is an act of compelling virtuosity." He also noted Fierstein's distinctive "throaty

Talullah voice and manner."

Torch Song Trilogy won the Obie Award for Best Play and the Oppenheimer Playwriting Award in 1982. The accolades and the awards continued when it moved to Broadway, where it played to sold-out houses and garnered a Drama Desk Award and a Tony Award. Fierstein also won the Theatre World Award as outstanding new performer, the Drama Desk Award for outstanding actor, and the Tony for best leading actor in a play in 1983.

While Fierstein was appearing in *Torch Song Trilogy* producer Alan Carr offered him the opportunity to write the book for a projected musical version of *La Cage aux Folles*, a play--originally in French--by Jean Poiret. As he had in *Torch Song Trilogy*, Fierstein sought to make respect, both for oneself and for others, central to the story.

As a drag artist Fierstein felt a strong responsibility to craft the role of Albin, the drag queen character in *La Cage aux Folles*, to show that he was fully human and worthy of respect. In a 1983 interview Fierstein cited the indignities that he had seen people endure--"gay bars being raided by the police, drag queens being beaten in cells." He also recalled arriving at the theater to see "fifty drag queens dancing their hearts out" at an audition for the show on the morning that he had learned the news of Tennessee Williams' death and was mourning both the loss of the great playwright and the pain that Williams had suffered in his life. The poignant moment only increased Fierstein's desire and resolve to promote dignity and acceptance of all people, especially the marginalized.

With a great score by Jerry Herman, *La Cage aux Folles* was a smash hit on Broadway and won numerous honors, including the 1983 Tony Award for best book.

Fierstein's next three plays, *Spookhouse* (1984), *Safe Sex*, another trilogy of one-acts (1987), and *Forget Him* (1988), met with considerably less success at the box-office, although some critics found parts of *Safe Sex* to be some of his best work. Fierstein also wrote the book for the musical *Legs Diamond* (1988). The show, which starred Peter Allen, was a disaster that has achieved a kind of legendary status in Broadway lore.

In the mid-1980s Fierstein began his career in movies, some cinematic and others for television. His early projects included the narration of Rob Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) and an acting role in Sidney Lumet's *Garbo Talks* (1984).

Fierstein revised the script of *Torch Song Trilogy* to bring the story to the big screen. Producers expressed reservations, saying that the play had become a "period piece" since it is set in the 1970s, before the AIDS crisis became acute. They also felt that a more prominent actor--either Dustin Hoffman or Richard Dreyfuss--should play the lead role. However, both Hoffman and Dreyfuss, having seen Fierstein onstage as Arnold, told him that they believed he was the best choice for the part.

The independent production company New Line Cinema made the 1987 film, in which Fierstein starred and which Paul Bogart directed. The movie was enthusiastically received. Critic Brian D. Johnson called it "a funny, poignant, and surprisingly wholesome tale of romantic love and old-fashioned family values," and David Ansen pronounced Fierstein's "generous, overflowing performance . . . a marvel."

Fierstein became a commentator for the television series *In the Life* in 1992. He also continued acting in a wide variety of films including Chris Columbus's *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway* (1994), Rob Epstein's *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), in which he appeared as himself, Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), and Emily Squires' *Elmo Saves Christmas* (1996). As a favor to his friend director John Nicollela he played a pirate villain in *Kull the Conqueror* (1997). Critic Rafer Guzman, though commenting that "the acting in *Kull* . . . leaves a lot to be desired," singled out Fierstein's performance as "the most delightful surprise in the film."

Fierstein also made guest appearances on numerous television shows including *Miami Vice* (1986), *The Simpsons* (1990), *Murder, She Wrote* (1992), and *Ellen* (1998). His 1992 turn in the *Cheers* episode "Rebecca's Lover . . . Not" won him an Emmy nomination.

In 1998 Fierstein voiced a character in the animated Disney feature *Mulan* (directed by Tony Bancroft), a story loosely based on the ancient Chinese tale of a girl who disguised herself as a boy so that her family could comply with an imperial decree that every household must supply one soldier to the army. Before accepting the part Fierstein verified that the majority of the cast was Asian so that he would not be "tak [ing] work away from an Asian actor."

One of Fierstein's many works on the theme of respect for all was the 1999 television movie *The Sissy Duckling* (directed by Anthony Bell). The project, for which Fierstein wrote the script and voiced the title character (Melissa Etheridge voiced his mother), won a Humanitas Prize in 2000. His adaptation of the story as a children's book (2002) was warmly received and sold extremely well.

Another of Fierstein's television projects was the movie *Common Ground* (directed by Donna Deitch, 2000), made for the Showtime cable network. Fierstein, Paula Vogel, and Terrence McNally each wrote a piece for the trilogy. The film, set in a fictional small town in Connecticut, looks at the lives of gay men and lesbians in the 1950s, the 1970s, and at the turn of the twenty-first century. Fierstein's contribution, "Andy & Amos," in which he also acted, concerns the issue of gay marriage.

After a lengthy absence Fierstein made a triumphant return to Broadway in the run-away hit musical *Hairspray* (2002), an adaptation of John Waters' 1988 film. The highly regarded team of Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman wrote the music, and Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan supplied the book.

Fierstein made his Broadway musical debut in a dress, as Edna Turnblad, the role played by the legendary drag performer Divine in the Waters film. Fierstein was thrilled to get the part and declared that he would "always be grateful, because for this brief, shining moment, I am Ethel Merman, starring in a musical."

Fierstein made the most of the opportunity and won a Tony Award. He became the first man to earn a Best Actor prize for playing a woman and only the second person to win Tony Awards in four different categories. (Tommy Tune was the first.) Among other honors, he also garnered a Drama Desk award for best lead actor in a musical.

After 711 performances as Edna, Fierstein left the show to continue his movie career. His recent projects have included two Danny DeVito films, *Death to Smoochy* (2002) and *Duplex* (2003), and the Craig B. Highberger documentary *Superstar in a Housedress* (2004) about Jackie Curtis, a flamboyant drag performer in the late 1960s and 1970s. Fierstein has also toured with his club act, "This Is Not Going to Be Pretty."

On the occasion of his final performance in *Hairspray*, Fierstein auctioned off two tickets to benefit the New York City Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. He has long been a vocal and outspoken champion of glbtq rights. He has pressed for AIDS research and also for education about safe sex. He has contributed his time and effort to a number of organizations including the Services Legal Defense Fund, a group that assists gay men and lesbians in the military.

In an eloquent speech in 1998 Fierstein decried the homophobia that had led to the vicious murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. He called upon glbtq people to be visible and active--to speak out, to vote, and to boycott--to work towards an end to bigotry.

Fierstein created a stir in 2003 when he appeared in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as Edna Turnblad dressed as Mrs. Santa Claus. Prior to the event he had written an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*

questioning whether a figure as beloved as Santa would continue to enjoy respect as a partner in a same-sex couple, and used the example to advocate for gay marriage.

Fierstein has vigorously encouraged all glbtq people to come out publicly but disagrees with the tactic of outing. He believes that the decision to come out is a personal one and also feels that people dragged from the closet make poor representatives of the community.

Fierstein is conscious of his own opportunities and responsibilities as a prominent gay man. He turned down the part of a child-eating clown in *Stephen King's It* (directed by Tommy Lee Wallace, 1990) lest he provide fuel for people who unjustly portray gay men as preying on children. He has consistently tried to write and perform roles that affirm personal dignity and encourage people to take pride in who they are and to respect others who may be different.

For that Harvey Fierstein may take pride in himself.

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