

Harvey with *Kinky Boots* director Jerry Mitchell and co-writer Cyndi Lauper.



Write Your Own Damn Story!

HARVEY FIERSTEIN IS BEST KNOWN FOR CAMPING IT UP IN *TORCH SONG TRILOGY*, *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES* AND *HAIRSPRAY*, AND HIS RECENT COLLABORATION WITH CYNDI LAUPER ON THE MUSICAL *KINKY BOOTS*. BUT, HE TELLS MATT MYERS, HE USED TO BE A PUNK WHO HUNG OUT WITH LOU REED AND ANDY WARHOL, AND WROTE A TRANNIE MOVIE FOR MADONNA!

DNA: You must be happy with the incredible success of *Kinky Boots*?

Harvey Fierstein: I don't know how it is in Australia but in America most theatre ticket-buyers are women. They decide what Broadway shows to see and their husband's go along. *Kinky Boots* has a profound effect on the heterosexual men who see it because not many musicals address [the relationship between] fathers and sons in this way. Straight guys feel that if they talk about how hurt they are with their fathers' expectations it somehow makes them weak.

Cyndi told us that she sits in the theatre and watches the audience.

Yes, I'll stand against the side wall and watch these men as the show progresses. I've seen wonderful things happen when they become engaged and start to realise what it's actually about. It's not about wearing high heels but, rather, how you perceive what your father wants for your life and whether you let that get in the way. As a kid my parents called my brother the doctor and me the lawyer. They called me the lawyer because I never stopped talking. My brother was in college taking pre-med courses when it occurred to him, "Why am I doing this? I have no interest in medicine!"

What led you to ask Cyndi Lauper to write the show's music?

I knew Cyndi a little, but I'd seen her talk about her love of Broadway. *Kinky Boots* has club numbers and I assumed that that would ease her in but it was actually the club numbers that were the hardest to write. Cyndi and I and director Jerry Mitchell wrestled with this for about four years. During that period, Cyndi wrote her autobiography, put out a blues album, did an Asian and American tour. I did a year on the road with *Fiddler On The Roof* as well as *La Cage Aux Folles* on Broadway.

You played *Hairspray*'s Edna Turnblad on Broadway. It's now been played by so many people, including John Travolta, do you have a favourite?

There's an old joke: how many actors does it take to play Hamlet? Eight. One to do it, and seven who can do it better!

Your play [and subsequent film] *Torch Song Trilogy* is loved by many in the LGBTI community. Does that feel special to you?

Not really. I'm busy living my own life. How it affects other people is something I'll hear about. People come up to me almost daily and say that *Torch Song* was how they came out... but that's their journey, not mine. I'm obviously very

appreciative of it, and I love it, but it's not something that I concentrate on.

Cyndi came to Melbourne for the opening of *Kinky Boots*. Did you think about coming?

The terrible truth about me is that I hate to travel. It's not a fear of flying, it's just that after sitting still for about three hours I want to open the door and jump out! I get so bored.

Music is important to many gay men when they're grow up. What were you listening to?

By the age of 13 I was already in art school and working for Andy Warhol by 16. I was there with Lou Reed playing in the room so I didn't look elsewhere for music. My formative music was protest – like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. By the time I was a teenager I was hanging out with The New York Dolls and was part of the punk movement.

In *Mrs Doubtfire* you play Robin William's character's gay brother. How did that role come about?

Robin and I were doing a benefit to raise money for a movie called *The Celluloid Closet*. We were at San Francisco's Castro Theatre with Lily Tomlin and, oh god, I bombed so bad! The audience hated me. The more they booed me, the more Robin loved it. I think they were there to see Robin and Lily and didn't want anything to do with this homo. So, we were in the parking lot and Robin was talking about his new movie and I said, "You could put me in a fucking movie!" That's how I got that gig.

***The Celluloid Closet*'s producer Howard Rosenman also spoke with DNA a while back.**

He and I tried but failed to produce a movie about Holly Woodlawn based on her autobiography *A Low Life In High Heels*. She was one of the Warhol superstar drag queens and was nominated for an Academy Award for *Trash*. There were three drag queens who hung out together – Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. I wanted Madonna to play Candy. I said to Madonna, "We've seen your pussy, now you need to show us your dick!" I said, "You walk into this apartment in a beautiful strapless gown and you're talking to your friends and then start taking your clothes off. We see your tits and you lift the dress up and there you have a dick! It would be wonderful!" She didn't buy it. I don't know why.

Your television roles have included *Miami Vice*, *Murder She Wrote*, *The Simpsons* and an Emmy nomination for *Cheers*. Do you feel part of classic TV?

I'm gonna tell you why I do that shit. You have to do a TV show or movie every year to qualify for

the union's health care. So I do one every year. But you don't know how it's going to turn out, especially when you are guest starring. Norman Lear once said that television is about creating a living room where people want to come and visit every week. They don't really care about the story, they want to see their friends. If you're watching *Will And Grace* and they have Cher on it's about seeing Jack being with Cher.

Being a guest star did earn you an Emmy nomination, though.

This is the truth. I was nominated for *Cheers* but I didn't want to fly myself all the way out to LA. I knew I was going to lose. I was up against *Seinfeld* and *Murphy Brown*. I said to my manager, "If you can get me a gig out there working then I'll do it." So he called Angela Lansbury and said, "Harvey needs to work in LA next week." She said send him out and we'll put him in the show and I ended up on *Murder She Wrote*. The same thing happened with *Miami Vice*. I was in New York, it was the dead of winter and I felt I could really use some sun. My manager said, "You want to do a *Miami Vice*? You can go lay on a Miami beach for a week." So I did!

Do you prefer one medium over the other?

I love television but I don't very much like *doing* television or film. I'm a theatre person, you know? It's just who I am.

Who has been the greatest influence on your career?

Oh! I owe everything to so many people. One day the playwright Ronald Tavel said, "Why don't you write a play." I said, "Because I can't spell." I'm very dyslexic and we didn't talk about dyslexia back in those days. He said, "There are people who, for two dollars an hour, will fix your spelling. You go ahead and write!" And that was so fucking freeing. Of course, with computers now, nobody needs to spell. You know, I have people come up to me once every couple of months and say, "You've got to write my life story!" I look at them and say, "Write your own damn life story."

It sounds like you've had a network of incredibly encouraging people.

I've had so many people be wonderful to me. You know what my voice sounds like... well, imagine having this voice and I having the creators of *Fiddler On The Roof* ask me to play the lead. Do you know what that feels like? You have to believe in yourself and work hard but it's wonderful when there are people around to encourage you. ★

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