



GUTTER ON LEAD: PHOTOGRAPHY: GREG DOYLE

THE SONG GOES ON

Before *Kinky Boots*, *Hairspray* and *La Cage Aux Folles*, Harvey Fierstein held a *Torch* of his own. Now his Tony-winning play returns for the Darlinghurst Theatre's 25th Anniversary.



THERE'S AN impressive canon of theatre that's inspired by, and resonates with, the LGBTIQ community: *Angels In America*, *Bent*, *The Boys In The Band* and, of course, Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*.

It's the story of Arnold Beckoff, a sharp-tongued drag performer, and his journey through various relationships and self-discoveries. The plot includes coming out, sexual discovery, and Arnold eventually adopting a teenage son. It also highlights the, sometimes, fraught relationships gay people have with their parents, even while wishing to follow in their footsteps as mentors and nurturers.

Torch Song Trilogy began as three separate plays: *International Stud*, *Fugue In A Nursery* and *Widows And Children First*, before combining into one play. The first act sees Arnold meeting Ed, his bisexual lover. The second takes place a year later when Arnold is living with Alan. By the third, Arnold is raising a teenager and dealing with "mother issues".

The original cast included Matthew Broderick as David and Estelle Getty as Arnold's mother, Mrs Beckoff, and won two Tony Awards – for Fierstein's performance and best new play. The 1988 film version recast Anne Bancroft as Ma Beckoff.

As a new production prepares to open on Broadway later this year, a local work is opening this month at Sydney's Darlinghurst Theatre with Stephen Colyer (*Falsettos*, *Cabaret*) at the helm. For Colyer, who directed *Torch Song*

Trilogy at Darlinghurst back in 2013, the play is an important LGBTIQ marker.

"*Torch Song Trilogy* is theatre giving a face to the experience of being different because of sexual orientation," he says, "and by making gay and queer stories visible, these plays humanise people for a much wider audience. Works like *Torch Song* are part of our gay cultural heritage but are not always being prioritised for revival, at least not in Australia," he says.

As with many other admirers of the play, Colyer was drawn to the story having seen the movie at an early age.

"I loved the film," he says. "It was important for me as a teenager because it showed a well-adjusted gay character standing up to discrimination in an uplifting way, at a time when gay characters were few and far between. Our 2013 production of *Torch Song* was when the marriage equality debate was becoming particularly ugly so it was timely to watch Arnold defending his right to be in a loving same-sex relationship and raise a child."

The new production stars Simon Corfield (*Packed To The Rafters*) as Arnold, Tim Draxl (*A Place To Call Home*) as Ed, with Kate Raison as Mrs Beckoff.

"The audience will be surprised by the casts' additional talents," promises Colyer, "but also impacted by the raw truths revealed through the musical numbers. We incorporate physical theatre, cabaret,

(Above) Simon Corfield as Arnold; (Right) Director, Stephen Colyer.



stand-up comedy and sit-com conventions – even sign language. It's quite eclectic."

Colyer believes that what makes *Torch Song Trilogy* so captivating, however, is its heart. "We can all identify with Arnold and we recognise how the obstacles he encounters are not dissimilar to our own," he says.

"This is largely due to the unflinching honesty of Fierstein's writing. I'd like to think that young gay audiences will appreciate how the rights they enjoy were fought for, and won, by the pioneering generations that came before – such as Fierstein. By envisioning a life that includes a child and a stable relationship, Arnold was ahead of his time, and the fact that these kinds of families exist today is thanks to the visionaries who put it on the stage.

"Unfortunately, the conservative views of Arnold's mother are the same arguments that are still used to discriminate against people today.

"Arnold continues to be an inspiring example to all people to stand up for themselves and be proud of who they are," says Colyer.

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