The Harvey 'Affair': Fierstein follows mantra to be 'true to yourself'

by Anne Marie Welsh

The gentle giant, Harvey Fierstein, whose voice resembles a bass kazoo, was kidding with that mock of the underground rehearsal hall where he, the 10-member cast and creative team of "A Catered Affair" assembled to meet the local media and the Old Globe staff in San Diego.

THE HARVEY 'AFFAIR' - Harvey Fierstein spent much of his early career in downtown New York basements -- most notably the off-off-Broadway La Mama in a converted frankfurter factory. How a guttural-voiced kid from Brooklyn became a beloved icon of mainstream culture is a great story of American showbiz. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. Beginning as a 16-year-old in drag in Andy Warhol's play "Pork," Fierstein spent much of his early career in downtown New York basements - most notably the off-off-Broadway La Mama in a converted frankfurter factory.

How a guttural-voiced, drag-loving gay kid from Brooklyn became a beloved icon of mainstream culture is one of the more heartwarming stories in American showbiz.

From his breakthrough "Torch Song Trilogy" (1981) to his film part in "Mrs. Doubtfire" and the book for "La Cage aux Folles," to his Tony-winning role as Edna Turnblad in "Hairspray" and his show-saving turn as Tevye in a 2005-06 revival of "Fiddler on the Roof," he's had a career as multifaceted as it is improbable.

"I'm wearing three hats on this production," said Fierstein who wrote the book, plays the bride's uncle, and serves, with his brother Ron, as a lead producer of "A Catered Affair." The show started previews for its pre-Broadway run at the Old Globe.

Read Fierstein's MySpace blog, though, and you'll find this fine arts grad of the Pratt Institute wears a fourth hat - prop-maker. Aping Martha Stewart, though on the cheap, he bought $37 worth of supplies at a Dollar Store and created the hearts-and-flowers "Just Married" sign to be seen in the show.

"I thought I was writing a show that was cheap to produce - 10 people. Actors don't cost anything; you can have 400 actors and it can still be cheap. It's the set and everything else that kills you," he said, a teasing lilt inflecting that surprisingly malleable rasp.

"A Catered Affair," he said, was "my idea. When I was trying to think of what I wanted to do next, I knew I didn't believe in taking something fabulous and turning it into something else."

Contacted by producers wanting to turn the movies "Stage Door" and "The Women" into musicals, he said he responded that they're already perfect, so he could only fail. "Instead, I chose to take something that sort of has the basis of something really wonderful, but doesn't quite make it."

MAKING A MUSICAL

Fierstein acquired the rights and met with Danny Chayefsky, the son of Paddy Chayefsky who wrote the original teleplay called "The Wedding Breakfast." It was re-scripted by Gore Vidal into the 1956 MGM film, "The Catered Affair," starring Bette Davis, Ernest Borgnine and Debbie Reynolds.

Over several years, Fierstein wrote the script and signed-up John Bucchino, a singer-songwriter much admired in cabaret circles but unknown in the musical theater field, to compose the score. He sent the script to John Doyle, the British director whose minimalist productions of Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" and later "Company" had made him, at 53, one of the hottest directors around.

"After reading to Page 10," said Doyle, "I called Harvey from London and said I want to do this. It's a drama with songs almost like Clifford Odets or Arthur Miller. The script is about ordinariness and I have a real understanding of what poverty means." The story centers upon a Bronx Irish Catholic family, the Hurleys, struggling over whether to spend their savings on the kind of wedding the parents never had. The Globe cast - which moves with the show to Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre for an April opening - is a dream assemblage of high-profile Tony winners (Tom Wopat and Faith Prince as the bride's parents), Broadway veterans

(Heather MacRae as a neighbor and Philip Hoffman as the groom's father), and acclaimed younger performers (Leslie Kritzer and Matt Cavenaugh as the engaged couple).

Composer Bucchino, writing his first book musical, said he's still pinching himself that he's scored a project "so clear in its emotional colors. I think it's real. It has what I like my art to have: heart and relatability."

Growing up, Fierstein spent a lot of time during his Brooklyn childhood relating to movies - "all the Bette Davis films" including "Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte" - on TV when he could fake a sick day from school. And then, with his brother Ron, whose taste differed, he went to theaters to watch Tarzan movies and such favorites as the early Bond films.

Mother Jacqueline didn't approve of all of her boys' choices, but, said Harvey Fierstein, who named a character in "La Cage" for her, "artistically my mother never got in the way."

Lovely as he felt the "Catered Affair" film was, he knew it was far from perfect. "Something was not complete for me."

Still, he said, "I would not have taken it on if I didn't want to respect what Paddy (Chayefsky) was trying to say. You sit and watch it and you almost nod your head. You know these people; you have that kind of identification, for (Chayefsky) had his hand wrapped around the human heart."

Comparing his own vision to the "lonely ache" of Carson McCullers or "the hiding of dark secrets" in Tennessee Williams, or that "dark spot" in Eugene O'Neill, Fierstein said his work has always been more outwardly directed, about "finding yourself and being true to yourself."

That mantra drove his writing for "Catered Affair." There, he found a way into the uncle character (Barry Fitzgerald in the film) so that he could play him as an uncloseted, but 1950s style gay man.

Sometimes calling the project a "play with music" rather than a musical, Fierstein said he knew the songs had to come at moments where "the characters can no longer speak ... and (the dialogue) lifts up into song."

Bucchino said that Fierstein first wrote the script as a play. He suggested they each read it and "make a list of the places where we think a song would naturally occur. We had dinner to compare the lists: They were almost identical."

Bucchino's cabaret songs straddle the line between pop and art songs and have drawn such interpreters (on his "Grateful" CD) as Judy Collins, Jimmy Webb, Art Garfunkel and the composer Adam Guettel. Bucchino, accustomed to working solo rather than in the collaborative world of theater, called Fierstein's generosity a blessing.

"Harvey is kind and has the biggest heart in the world. He has guided me through this process and advised me on things I just didn't understand - like what do you ask the producer or the stage manager, things about the hierarchy and what you should and shouldn't say to whom. He could not have been more generous."

Fierstein was introduced to Bucchino's work by his friend Julie Halston, a comedian. She told him, he said: "You've got to hear this man's music. So I listened. Each song creates an entire world. It's like sitting down and reading short story after short story. I felt if I could convince him to do this, to say the things that couldn't be said in speech, we'd have something.

"One of the hardest things to do is make the characters talk the way they sing, so they don't jump out of character. I think we've done that. We've written something special. It's singular in that it doesn't follow a model."

'TORCH SONG TRILOGY'

Neither did "Torch Song Trilogy" which Fierstein wrote act by act over five years beginning in 1976. Lillian Faderman, a pioneering lesbian historian and author of the recent study Gay L.A., saw the complete "Trilogy" in New York in 1981 where its crossover appeal was immediate.

"I had a ticket for a matinee and I had a vague idea that this was a play about a drag queen, but to my surprise that matinee audience was as swept away as I was. What was different was the way that Harvey humanized the main character, Arnold."

Until then, Faderman said, gay theater, "meaning gay theater written for the mainstream, meant things like 'Suddenly Last Summer' (Tennessee Williams, 1958) in which homosexuality was guilt-ridden and pathologized or 'The Boys in the Band' (Mart Crowley, 1968) in which every character was neurotic."

Fierstein took a character, Faderman said, "that you'd think would be the least sympathetic to a mainstream matinee audience, a character whose experience was totally beyond that of 99.9 percent of those people and made everyone understand that a drag queen had feelings, that Arnold was like everyone else. He adopts a teenage kid. He wants a family. (Fierstein) humanized him."

Arnold's search for secure love is clear-eyed, for Fierstein shows how society and the law failed the gay community with the murder of Arnold's lover, Alan. But he closes the play optimistically, almost in sitcom style, with Arnold's mother padding about in rabbit slippers and Arnold himself creating a family, even exalting family values, in a way that still allows him his individuality.

Various scenes and acts of the play premiered at off-off-Broadway venues including La Mama. The Broadway edition of the full trilogy proved a cultural watershed for the American mainstream's awareness of

gay life.

The show brought Fierstein two Tony awards, for best play and lead actor in a play. He earned two more Tonys - in two other categories - with the book for the musical "La Cage aux Folles" (1984) and his now legendary turn as the buxom laundress Edna in the Jack O'Brien-directed musical of "Hairspray" (2003).

Comments on his blog reflect the ways in which he's become a pal to theater fans and a role model for gay kids, encouraging them to "Express yourself!" whether by playing drag roles like Edna or writing about their experiences. Among his own books: the award-winning children's book, "The Sissy Duckling," also an HBO special.

After his stint in floral housedresses and Pucci prints in "Hairspray," Fierstein said he planned to take a year off to rest and complete the script for "A Catered Affair." Then, he was offered the role of paterfamilias Tevye in director David Levaux's initially miscast, tonally cool revival of "Fiddler on the Roof."

His impulse was to turn it down, but he called his friend, Globe artistic director O'Brien.

"Jack said, let's put it this way: You will either do it or you will tell people they offered me 'Fiddler,' which nobody will believe and which will make a boring cocktail party story. So I did it."

And he triumphed in an unaccustomed straight part that emotionally and culturally was part of his DNA.

Eager now to have Globe audiences tell him whether his "Catered Affair" is as affecting as the collaborators think, he said of his writing and playing Tevye, "You just can't let anything stop you. People say I want to quit my job so I can write a novel. But you write a novel by sitting down and writing a novel. When I wrote 'Le

Cage aux Folles,' I let it blow everything else away. You do it because you need to do it. And I needed to do this."

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