

GOODSPEED MUSICALS

AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

La
Cage
aux
Folles

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LA CAGE AUX FOLLES
Goodspeed Opera House
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Music and Lyrics by
JERRY HERMAN

Book by
HARVEY FIERSTEIN

Based on the play by
JEAN POIRET

Lighting Design by
JOHN LASITER

Costume Design by
MICHAEL McDONALD

Scenic Design by
MICHAEL SCHWEIKARDT

Choreographed by
RALPH PERKINS

Directed by
ROB RUGGIERO

Executive Director
MICHAEL GENNARO

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CHARACTER SUMMARY



*Jamison Stern as Albin.
©Diane Sobolewski.*

GEORGES: The owner of the legendary nightclub La Cage aux Folles, partner to Albin and biological father to Jean-Michel.

ALBIN: The star performer at La Cage aux Folles known as Zaza, Georges's partner and Jean-Michel's surrogate mother.

JEAN-MICHEL: Georges' son who wishes to transform his parents before they meet his fiancée Anne and her traditional family.

ANNE: Jean-Michel's fiancée and the daughter of conservative politician Edouard Dindon.

EDOUARD DINDON: A conservative politician and head of the "Tradition, Family and Morality Party."

MARIE DINDON: The wife of Edouard Dindon and Anne's mother.

JACOB: The flamboyant maid employed by Georges and Albin.

JACQUELINE: The owner of Chez Jacqueline and a good friend of Albin and Georges.

MONSIEUR AND MADAME RENAUD: Owners of a popular café and friends of Albin and Georges.

CHANTAL, MONIQUE, HANNA, MERCEDES, BITELLE, PHAEDRA, CLO-CLO: Performers at La Cage aux Folles otherwise known as Les Cagelles.

his wig in front of the audience, throws it at Georges, and storms out of the club.

The next morning, Georges finds Albin at a local café and tries to apologize for his behavior. He suggests that Albin attend the dinner with the Dindons as Jean-Michel's beloved Uncle Al. Although Albin is still upset with his family, he agrees to "straighten up" for Jean-Michel. With the help of some friends, Georges attempts to teach Albin how to act like a "macho" man.



Jamison Stern as Albin and James Lloyd Reynolds as Georges. ©Diane Sobolewski.

Later, back at the redesigned apartment, Georges tells his son that Albin will be attending the dinner as Uncle Al; yet, Jean-Michel is opposed to the idea and expresses misgivings. As father and son argue, Albin intercepts a telegram from Sybil stating that she will not be attending the dinner and he hatches a plan to save the day. The Dindons arrive at the apartment and Albin appears as Jean-Michel's forty-year-old mother, in pearls and a sensible suit. The meeting immediately heads in a negative direction when Mr. Dindon begins talking about La Cage aux Folles. Jacob ends up saving the conversation by burning dinner and forcing the group to take a trip to a local restaurant "Chez Jacqueline," which belongs to an old friend of Albin and Georges. Mrs.

Dindon is very impressed when Jacqueline personally greets their party; although, no one has informed Jacqueline of the situation and she asks Albin to perform a song. Albin agrees to perform and everyone in the restaurant begins to take part in the song, including the Dindons. Albin becomes caught up in the crowd's enthusiasm and tears off his wig, revealing his identity. Mr. and Mrs. Dindon are appalled that they have been dining with a drag queen and flee the restaurant.

Back at the apartment, the Dindons demand that their daughter abandon her fiancée, but Anne refuses to acquiesce to her parent's command. Upon witnessing Anne's conversation with her parents, Jean-Michel realizes how badly he has treated his own family and asks their forgiveness, which is quickly granted. The Dindons prepare to leave without their daughter, but Jacqueline, who has arrived with members of the press, blocks their exit. Jacqueline realizes the Dindons' identity and calls the local press to photograph the famous anti-homosexual activist with the most infamous homosexual couple in St. Tropez. Georges and Albin step in and offer to make Mr. and Mrs. Dindon a proposition: if the Dindons allow Anne and Jean-Michel to marry, Georges will help the Dindons escape through La Cage aux Folles. The Dindons grudgingly agree to the deal and everyone makes their way to the club. Georges takes the stage as Les Cagelles prepare the Dindons for the grand finale and their escape. Georges grandly introduces each of the Les Cagelles, and then he introduces the Dindons, who disguised themselves as members of the nightclub's revue to escape the press. The Dindons successfully escape the club, Anne and Jean-Michel leave to continue planning their wedding and Albin and Georges share a kiss as the curtain closes.



HARVEY FIERSTEIN (*Book*) was born on June 6, 1954 in Brooklyn, New York and was the youngest son of Jewish immigrant parents from Eastern Europe. The Fierstein family encouraged both of their young sons to attend cultural events in New York City and Saturday matinees on Broadway quickly became a favorite outing. Inspired by the incredible performers he had seen onstage, young Harvey Fierstein decided to create an act of his own and began dressing in drag and performing show tunes. He became a female impersonator in a nightclub in NYC's East Village at the age of 16 and, as a result, was offered a role in Andy Warhol's 1971 production of *Pork* at the La MaMa Experimental Theater Club.

Fierstein graduated from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York in 1973; however he opted to pursue a career in writing rather than painting. Over the course of the next few years he developed a series of plays about a young gay man named Arnold Beckoff that eventually became *Torch Song Trilogy*. *Torch Song Trilogy* won an Obie Award for Best Play and the Oppenheimer Playwriting Award in 1982 before moving to Broadway and winning a Drama Desk Award and a Tony Award. Fierstein, who played Arnold in the Broadway production, won the Theatre World Award for Outstanding New Performer, a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actor, and a Tony Award for Best Leading Actor in a Play in 1983.



Harvey Fierstein as Albin/Za-Za in the 2011 Broadway revival.

The success of *Torch Song Trilogy* brought Fierstein to the attention of producer Alan Carr who offered him the opportunity to write the book for a musical based on a Jean Poiret play titled, *La Cage aux Folles*. Fierstein worked alongside legendary songwriter Jerry Herman to create the musical version of *La Cage aux Folles* and their hard work was amply rewarded. *La Cage aux Folles* was a hit on Broadway and won six Tony Awards, including Best Musical in 1984. Following the success of *La Cage aux Folles*, Fierstein continued writing and created *Spookhouse* in 1984, *Safe Sex* in 1987, and *Forget Him* in 1988. He also wrote the book to the legendary Broadway flop *Legs Diamond* in 1988.

In addition to his many stage works, Fierstein began a successful film and TV career in the mid-1980s appearing in Sidney Lumet's *Garbo Talks* and narrating *The Times of Harvey Milk* in 1984. He also starred in the film version of *Torch Song Trilogy*, which was produced in 1987 by, then unknown production company, New Line Cinema. Fierstein has also had parts in films like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *The Celluloid Closet*, *Independence Day*, and *Elmo Saves Christmas*. Additionally, he has lent his distinctive voice to animated characters in *Mulan* and *The Sissy Duckling*.

Fierstein returned to the Broadway stage in 2002 as Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray*. He won a Tony Award for his performance and became the first man to win the award for Best Actor while playing a woman. Fierstein also became the second person to win a Tony Award in four different categories.

In 2005 he starred in the Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* and played Albin in the 2011 Broadway revival of *La Cage aux Folles*. He has continued writing for the stage and recently wrote the librettos for the musicals *A Catered Affair*, *Newsies*, and *Kinky Boots*. Fierstein also wrote and produced the Broadway play *Casa Valentina*.



Director Rob Ruggiero

*"I am what I am
I am my own special creation."*

Those iconic lyrics from the score of *La Cage aux Folles* have resonated with audiences since the show premiered in 1983. And they don't just belong to every gay person in the world—they belong to all of us. That song has become an anthem for every human being's expression of individuality, and a source of strength and inspiration for so many people. In these words lie

only a part of what makes *La Cage aux Folles* resonate with audiences.

"I wanted to write a show about two sweet men that the audience would love and take into their hearts." -Jerry Herman

La Cage is many things. It is great entertainment. It is also a unique love story. It is about standing up for yourself and fighting bigotry. But when it comes right down to it, *La Cage* is about acceptance, love, and family. It's about the power of relationships, the journey to loving yourself, fully embracing one's individuality, and re-examining the definition of family beyond the traditional structure of mother, father and child. All this—plus a sensational Jerry Herman score, great characters, fabulous costumes, outlandish humor, spectacular dances...and drag queens! What more could you ask for!?

*"It's rather gaudy but it's also rather grand
And while the waiter pads your check he'll kiss your hand
The clever gigolos romance the wealthy matrons
At La Cage Aux Folles."*

Without compromising all the outrageous "fun" of the show, this *La Cage* will be grounded in a focus on family and relationship. One of the most powerful moments in the story comes when Georges tries to help his son Jean-Michel (the young man who was raised by Georges and Albin) see beyond his embarrassment and the fear of losing his fiancée to understand the gift of parental love.

"How often is someone concerned with the tiniest thread of your life?"

*Concerned with whatever you feel and whatever you touch
Look over there, look over there
Somebody cares that much.*

*When your world spins too fast, and your bubble has burst
Someone puts himself last, so that you can come first.*

So count all your loves who will love you from now 'til the end of your life.

*And when you have added the loves who have loved you before
Look over there, look over there
Somebody loves you more."*

You can't find a more universal human emotion than the love and respect for a parent. Ultimately, Jean-Michel comes to embrace that the love of a "mother" exists far beyond gender. The success of *La Cage* proves this kind of material is timeless and can exist without boundary.

Our set designer, Michael Schweikardt, has outdone himself with a set that is deliciously over the top, glamorous, and very pink! It is not only beautiful, but skillfully re-invents itself with imaginative scenic gestures. Michael McDonald has designed an array of dazzling and spangled costumes to enhance this exotic world. Our choreographer, Ralph Perkins, has a keen understanding of the style of the show, and has created dances that celebrate this unique world with a few fun surprises.

One of the biggest decisions when directing *La Cage* is the casting of Georges and Albin. Quite often, they are cast with more mature actors. On the advice of librettist Harvey Fierstein, we cast two attractive men in their 40s who could truthfully embody a gay partnership. The outrageously talented Jamison Stern is our Albin. He is brave, funny, and delightfully unpredictable. Our Georges is the wonderful James Lloyd Reynolds, who brings a warm charm and intelligence to the role. Beyond the "show" element of *La Cage*, this relationship is key to anchoring the story of an untraditional family. They are surrounded by a fantastically talented company of actors, including the seven "Notorious Cagelles" ...so fasten your seatbelts!

La Cage has never been produced on the Goodspeed stage, so I am particularly excited to bring this delightful musical to Connecticut audiences in this intimate theater. After working on a production of *Hello, Dolly!* in St. Louis last summer, I found a new appreciation for the brilliance of a Jerry Herman musical. Combined with the remarkable comic writing and story-telling talents of Harvey Fierstein, *La Cage aux Folles* is a director's dream. It is clear these men found unique inspiration from this story and these characters. I hope this production will celebrate that uniqueness and bring a new understanding to this remarkable story of love and family.

*"And now, I beg you... open your eyes.
You have arrived at LA CAGE AUX FOLLES!!!"*

THE HISTORY OF DRAG

A drag queen is defined as a man who dresses as a woman, typically for the purposes of entertainment.

Although the origins of the term drag queen are disputed, its first recorded use to refer to actors dressed in women's clothing is from 1870. Many believe that drag was theatre slang for the sensation of long skirts trailing on the floor. There is also a common belief that DRAG is an acronym for "dressed resembling a girl," coined by Shakespeare in the footnotes of his plays. This legend is probably not accurate, though, as the use of acronyms wasn't common until the twentieth century and Shakespeare's works predated common usage of the term. 'Queen' is most likely derived from the Old English 'quean,' which was a derogatory term commonly used in the 1700s to describe prostitutes and gay men. Since then, the word has been reclaimed in a more positive sense.

Also known as female impersonators, drag queens have existed through the length of human civilization and across all cultures. They appear in ancient Roman and Greek literature and history and in Chinese classical theatre. In England, women were banned from performing on stage in Shakespearean times, so men had to perform all the roles, including the female ones. Only after the Restoration in 1660 were women allowed to take the stage as actresses and the first recorded female actor played Desdemona in Thomas Killgrew's production of *Othello* on December 8, 1660.

Drag queens, as we know them today, first came to be in the 1950s and '60s and flourished in the '80s and '90s when a strong gay culture began to take hold. A number famous actors have performed in drag including Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Dustin Hoffman, Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon, Neil Patrick Harris, John Travolta, and Bing Crosby. Notable examples of drag can be found in many popular movies and musicals such as *White Christmas*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Tootsie*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Hairspray*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The Birdcage*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Kinky Boots*, *Rent*, *Where's Charley?*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *All Shook Up*, *Good News!*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

The many costumes of LES CAGELLES



An unprecedented triumph of the Parisian theatre world, Jean Poiret's hilarious farce *La Cage aux Folles* premiered at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal on February 1, 1973. This wildly popular comedy ran for nearly 1,800 performances and was adapted into a 1978 film seen by more than five million people in France. It premiered in the US in 1979 and became the highest grossing foreign language film in US history at that time, with domestic box-office revenues exceeding \$20 million. It was also nominated for three Oscars, including best screenplay. The film spun off two additional sequels, *La Cage aux Folles II* in 1980 and *La Cage aux Folles: The Wedding* in 1985, as well as a separate 1996 American film adaptation of the play, *The Birdcage*. But, most importantly for musical theatre fans, a big, fabulous, splashy, old-fashioned musical adaptation of the play opened on Broadway at the Palace Theatre in 1983.

Yet, before the plumed and spangled "Cagelles" could kick their way on to the Great White Way, there were some challenges to overcome. For example, *La Cage aux Folles* the musical almost had a completely different creative team and title. In 1976, Hollywood Producer Allan Carr was itching to produce his first Broadway musical when he attended the play *La Cage aux Folles* in Paris. Encouraged by the appeal of the play, he decided to produce an Americanized musical adaptation to be set in New Orleans titled: *The Queen of Basin Street*. Carr hired Jay Presson Allen to write the book, Maury Yeston to compose the score, Mike Nichols to direct, and Tommy Tune to choreograph. A dispute led to members of the team dropping out, and the project seemed doomed. Despite this false start, Carr believed in the material and began anew. He negotiated a settlement with Yeston and replaced him with composer Jerry Herman. Next, they approached Harvey Fierstein, whose successful play *Torch Song Trilogy* was breaking new ground in the theatre, and invited him to pen his first Broadway libretto. Carr persuaded theatre veteran Arthur Laurents to direct once Herman and Fierstein were on board. The new creative team agreed to revert to the original setting in St. Tropez, France and use the title *La Cage aux Folles*.

La Cage aux Folles eventually became the standout hit of the Broadway season and the first long-running musical about a gay couple. Everyone was petrified on the night of the first out-of-town tryout. As Arthur Laurents recalled, "Eight o'clock. The Colonial Theatre, Boston. A lovely evening in early summer, and I am more frightened than I have ever been in my theatrical life...the exhausted performers are doubly frightened. Because no audience has ever seen this show. And how, how are these good Bostonians going to react to an American musical which begins with drag queens and ends with two male lovers walking off into a metaphorical sunset, arms around each other?" He goes on to describe the elation they felt when they realized that the show worked: "And then Gene sings, so simply, so truly; and when he finished,

the audience applauds as I have never heard an audience applaud a ballad before. I begin pounding Harvey who sits in front of me, saying over and over: "It works, it works!"

La Cage aux Folles played to standing-room only crowds and shattered box office records at Boston's Colonial Theatre. It opened for previews at the Palace Theatre on Broadway with advance ticket sales of over \$3.5 million and it was the first musical to charge a whopping \$47.50 for orchestra seats. *La Cage aux Folles*

went on to sweep the 1983-84 Tony Awards with six wins, including Best Musical. The original Broadway production ran for more than four years, playing 1,762 performances. *La Cage aux Folles* later made history by winning the Tony Award for Best Revival twice, first in 2004 and again in 2010. What's more, it is the musical that gave us such Herman gems as "The Best of Times," "Song on the Sand," and "I Am What I Am." The impact and broad appeal of *La Cage aux Folles* are self-evident; it is a hilarious, tuneful show that conveys the importance of love, family and acceptance.

Director Rob Ruggiero (Goodspeed's *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Carousel*, *Show Boat*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Camelot*, *Big River*, and *1776*) endeavors to delight audiences with a *La Cage aux Folles* that will be grounded in family and relationships without compromising the outrageous and amusing aspects of the show. Ruggiero intends to anchor the story of an untraditional family through realistic and believable casting choices. Regarding the technical aspects of the show, Ruggiero states, "Our set designer, Michael Schweikardt, has outdone himself with a set that is deliciously over the top, glamorous, and very pink! It is not only beautiful, but skillfully re-invents itself with imaginative scenic gestures. Michael McDonald has designed an array of dazzling and spangled costumes to enhance this exotic world." Ruggiero is excited to share Jerry Herman's brilliant music and Harvey Fierstein's remarkable comic writing with Goodspeed audiences. We hope you enjoy this timeless musical that has been a source of strength, entertainment and inspiration for so many people.



The original Broadway cast of *La Cage*.

What Mr. Laurents calls “tricks”—he doesn’t want to enumerate them, lest he spoil any surprises—he sees merely as tools. “You can’t get by with just tricks, but you use them to heighten a theatrical moment,” he explains. “It’s the childhood part of theater, all the glamour and glitter and beads and feathers and sequins, and disappearing this and appearing that. But finally it has to get down to people and emotions, and that’s been missing from musical theater, badly. I really feel that musical theater has been getting lost in all the icing, with no cake. It’s lovely to see the icing, but if you’re going to spend \$45, there has to be more. I think so many people have the mistaken notion that to be positive is to be inartistic, and that cynicism and a bleak view of life equal art. I don’t believe it. Grubbiness has no monopoly on truth. Personally, I don’t know why Beckett doesn’t jump out a window, given the way he sees the world. All the icing and the glitter make people feel better, and if you feel better you’re more disposed to accepting what’s served to you. I think people do need somebody else to say, ‘Yes, life is glorious, or can be, if you let yourself go emotionally—and have a sense of humor about it.’ I think *La Cage aux Folles* does that.”

.....

Nor does Mr. Laurents harbor any illusions about its potential long-term effect. “I don’t think theater changes attitudes,” he says matter-of-factly. “I think we would like to think that, but I don’t believe it.” Although the context of *La Cage aux Folles* is highly specific, Mr. Laurents sees its message as universal. The show’s theme is encapsulated in the first act curtain number, when George Hearn, as the maternal drag queen hurt and angered by his surrogate son’s attempt to exclude him from the pre-nuptial proceedings, sings a proud and defiant song called “I Am What I Am.” “What it is saying in terms of the character is very important to every single member of the audience,” Mr. Laurents declares. “It’s the way everybody should feel about himself and his life. This show takes you into a fantasy world in St. Tropez with people who are not quite connected with reality, but it ends with what life is all about: two people who love each other. You love somebody else, and you have it. There’s no security blanket like the love of another person whom you love.”

Indeed, Jerry Herman—who says he never thinks in terms of messages when working on a score—views *La Cage aux Folles* as a love story above all. To him, the essence of the show is summed up in a tender love song called “Song on the Sand,” which Georges sings to Albin. “I chose the very identifiable situation of remembering part of a song that reminds you of an earlier time,” Mr. Herman says. “Georges sings, ‘I hear la da da da da da and I’m young and in love,’ but it’s not only about Georges and Albin; it’s about anyone who remembers the beginning of a love affair. I watch couples hold hands during that number, and it thrills me. This is an emotion that

works for all people. It’s the same love everyone has, if they’re lucky.”

Harvey Fierstein says he was two-thirds of the way through writing *La Cage aux Folles* before he realized what it was about. For him, the emphasis is slightly different, focusing on the son’s journey toward an understanding of what is important in life. “Obviously, what we want people to go home with is a reaffirmation of relationships,” Mr. Fierstein says. “I hate to call it a family unit, but that’s what it is. A family does not have to be blood relations; it’s people who come together and take care of each other. If I had to sum up what the show is about in one phrase it would be, ‘Honor thy father and thy mother’—whether that’s your real father and mother or the people who have made you a person or the people who care about you.”

If *La Cage aux Folles* changes no one’s attitude toward homosexuality, Mr. Laurents thinks it may at least prompt its audiences to a renewed appreciation of the power of love. “What I hope they will take away from it is a simple point,” he says. “Everyone has games they play, and here are two people who play these games. And one of the things you must understand about loving someone is that there are going to be times when this person is going to behave what you consider to be very badly, for a reason that is separate from you. But if you understand that they can do that and still love and respect you, then the love will go on. But you must finally demand from the other person; you must call them to account, and say, ‘You have now gone too far—this you cannot do.’ The other person will see it, and say, ‘you’re right.’”

That, at least, is how it happens on Broadway.”



Click the links below to watch two very different Harvey Fierstein interviews. The first is from 1983 when *La Cage* first opened on Broadway and the second is from 2011 when Fierstein took on the role of Albin in the most recent Broadway revival. These interviews are a good indicator at to just how much views have changed over the past 30 years.

[WATCH THE 1983 INTERVIEW](#)

[WATCH THE 2011 INTERVIEW](#)

1983 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfyy5QC40io>
2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZaauBFdCq8>

“THE BEST OF TIMES” EXCERPT FROM SHOWTUNE: A MEMOIR

By Jerry Herman & Marilyn Stasio

*“It’s rather gaudy but it’s also rather grand
And while the waiter pads your check he’ll kiss your hand
The clever gigolos romance the wealthy matrons
At La Cage aux Folles
It’s slightly Forties and a little bit New Wave
You may be dancing with a girl who needs a shave
Where both the riff-raff and the royalty are patrons
At La Cage aux Folles
Eccentric couples always punctuate the scene
A pair of eunuchs and a nun and a Marine
It’s bad and beautiful, it’s bawdy and bizarre
I knew a duchess who got pregnant at the bar
Just who is who and what is what is quite the question
At La Cage aux Folles.”*

“Along with *Mame*, working on *La Cage aux Folles* was the most joyous time of my life. For me, it was the very best of times.

La Cage saved my sanity and put me back on top. I mean really on top. To write a show that runs for five years on Broadway and becomes an international phenomenon—that’s the top. To win a Tony Award over five of the most talented composer-lyricists in the business—that’s the top. Best of all, this show was an entertainment that also made an important statement about our lives. That was the crowning glory. I like to think that it was fated for me to write *La Cage*. From the moment I saw the original French film, I had this intense longing to write a musical about those two lovable men and their wonderful story.

.....

We had never seen characters like this on a Broadway stage. Or a setting like *La Cage aux Folles*, the nightclub where Albin does his drag act. Besides being glamorous, the drag-club setting also offered a brand new milieu to work in. In my mind, I saw all these possibilities for writing something truly original—and very theatrical.

.....

Once the word was out that I was working on this material, people kept telling me that I was doing something groundbreaking. I was writing the first Broadway musical about two men who love each other.

La Cage is a gay love story. But it is much more than that. The hero of that show is a gay man who finds his pride by challenging his own son’s bigotry toward homosexuals. The moral of the piece is actually very wholesome, because it is about standing up for yourself and fighting bigotry. In the beginning, people were shocked when they heard about

the gay romance and the homosexual themes. But once they became involved in these people’s lives, they realized that the human issues applied to everybody—not just homosexuals.

I think everybody working on the project was aware, on some level, of the importance of what we were doing—the chorus kids, our two stars George Hearn and Gene Barry, our director Arthur Laurents, Harvey Fierstein, who wrote the book, and me too. But we were not out to change the world and wipe out bigotry overnight. We were just doing a musical.

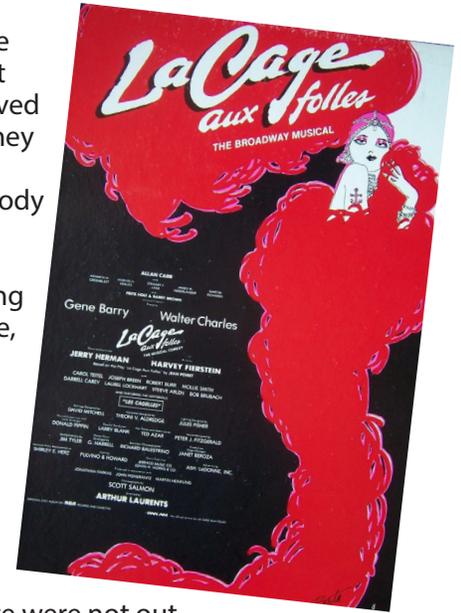
There was a strong feeling of camaraderie on this show. We may have been three gay men, but you couldn’t have found three more diverse individuals to put together on a project.

What an unlikely trio we were! Arthur Laurents is from the Leonard Bernstein/Stephen Sondheim school of musical theater. Coming from that literate world of traditional theater, Arthur represents the classy Old Guard generation. Harvey Fierstein was the flashy young comet who burst on the theater scene with the *Torch Song Trilogy*, a gay man who is more in touch with modern theatrical trends and the political views of the younger generation. As a person, Harvey is full of humor and pizzazz, and about as different from the elegant Mr. Laurents as you can get.

And in the middle you have me, Mr. Show Business, the razzmatazz musical-comedy writer, a cheerful man whose life is dedicated to making people smile and feel good and leave the theater humming a show tune. The three of us didn’t have a thing in common—except the passion we had for this show.

Our collaboration worked because we all respected each other, learned from each other, and we shared our ideas with each other. We pulled this off because we agreed to put aside any individual political agendas and make *La Cage* appealing to the broadest mass audience.

The material was so rich; we could have done it lots of different ways. We could have toned down the humor, given it a much more serious tone, or made it more romantic, or more politically militant. The material seemed to us to work best as a charming, colorful, great-looking musical comedy—an old-fashioned piece of entertainment.”





George Hearn as Albin/Zaza, 1984.
©Martha Swope.

The main conflict in *La Cage aux Folles* is very similar to that used in *Mame*; a son is embarrassed by the actions of his non-biological mother. In *La Cage aux Folles*, Jean-Michel's embarrassment stems from his fear of looking "abnormal" or "unacceptable" in the eyes of others, a not uncommon occurrence in teenagers or young adults. According to

author Abigail Garner, parents of children raised by same-sex couples are "often surprised when they find that their children are presenting one reality to their parents but living another." Unfortunately, in his haste to impress his future in-laws and preserve his romantic relationship, Jean-Michel allows his embarrassment to cloud his judgment and begs his parents to alter their surroundings along with their very personalities to better suit his idea of a traditional family. While he may not be immediately likable for audiences, Jean-Michel is an instantly relatable character. His struggle to accept his parents' eccentricities is something virtually every human being goes through and is so common that it has become a continuous running joke in movies and sitcoms; being embarrassed by your parents is almost a rite of passage. And though his father, Georges, is willing to go to extremes to placate his son, he is unwilling to allow Jean-Michel's embarrassment to permanently divide their family. He counters his son's embarrassment of his parents, and Albin in particular, with the nights that they nursed Jean-Michel through sickness, the times that they have put Jean-Michel's well-being before his own, and reminds their son that Albin is his mother in every way, save for his gender. When placed in this light the universally relatable message of "honor thy mother and father" is communicated to Jean-Michael and the quietly observing audience members.

One thing that *La Cage aux Folles* makes abundantly clear to its audience is that despite the fact that Albin and Georges are willing to "straighten up" for Jean-Michel, they are not ashamed of themselves. As Albin defiantly proclaims at the end of Act I, "I am what I am. I am my own special

creation so come take a look, give me the hook or the ovation. It's my world that I want to have a little pride in, my world and it's not a place I have to hide in." And while they are hurt by Jean-Michel's actions, they are willing to abide by his wishes because they love him. Jean-Michel is acting out of love in his own right, love for his fiancée. Even the Dindons, the villains of the piece if there are any, negatively react to Albin and Georges true identities out of love for their daughter and their wish to protect her. The show, even in its negative moments, is centered on love and the lengths that a person is willing to go for the ones they love.

In a musical like *La Cage aux Folles*, it is easy to become caught up in the glitz and glamour that takes place onstage and miss the deeper meaning behind the piece. *La Cage aux Folles* is a musical that is full of rollicking show tunes, comedic moments, and larger-than-life characters, yet in spite of this it never loses sight of its ultimate focus—family and love. Perhaps this is the reason that show has been so successful and is often called Jerry Herman's "best musical." To quote George Hearn, the actor who originated the role of Albin on Broadway, "Dressing up is just the cosmetic part of this show. It's about love, respect for yourself, and growing older. It's a universal love story."

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES AND THE STATE OF MUSICAL THEATRE

Since its formal creation in 1866, musical theatre has become a distinctly American art form and, like all art forms, has become a mode of expression and reflection.

Musicals in the 1920s reflected America's adventurous spirit and love of glamour, the 1930s and the Great Depression brought a surge of optimistic musicals that assured the public good times would soon return, and the 1940s, 50s, and 60s brought forth the Golden Age of musical theatre, love stories, adventure, and rock and roll.

Despite America's love of the musical theatre genre, society began to shift its attention away from the razzle-dazzle and gentle love story of the traditional musical to focus on a more avant-garde style in the 1970s and 80s.

The shift from traditional musicals to avant-garde musical theatre can be seen specifically in the parallel careers of Stephen Sondheim and Jerry Herman. Sondheim and Herman represented the opposing factions of musical theatre that developed from the 1960s to the 1980s. Sondheim musicals moved beyond the

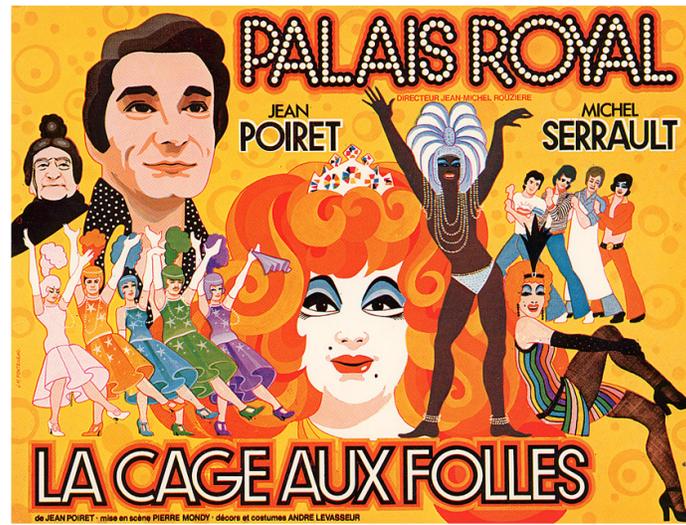
romantic plots typically used in shows and tended to focus on the more sinister sides of human nature, for example, *Sweeney Todd*; whereas Jerry Herman was a devotee of the old-fashioned musical and the hummable show tune as seen in *Hello, Dolly!*. Broadway audiences welcomed musicals that differed from the old-fashioned style and by the end of the 1970s the public appeared to prefer dramatic and sweeping shows like *Evita* to the optimistic

comedies of writers like Jerry Herman. The Tony winners for Best Musical in the late 1970s and early 1980s reflected this change in taste with *Sweeney Todd* winning in 1979, *Evita* winning in 1980, and *Nine* winning in 1983. Despite this shift in attitudes, old-fashioned values were still sparingly embraced in hits like *Annie* and *42nd Street*. In 1983, Jerry Herman managed to combine the public's desire to see profound groundbreaking musicals and his old-fashioned sensibility into a hit Broadway musical called *La Cage aux Folles*.

La Cage aux Folles premiered in Paris in 1973 at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. The play was about two gay men living in St. Tropez and how their lives were turned upside down when their son announced that he was marrying the daughter of a conservative politician. At their son's request, the two men try to conceal their lifestyle and the fact that their ownership of a drag club when the fiancée and her parents come for dinner. The French farce ran for almost 1800 performances from 1973 to 1978. The long-running play was so successful that it was adapted into a French-Italian film in 1978. Unsurprisingly, the film was a huge success in Europe and spawned two sequels. What was surprising was how popular the film became with American audiences. The success of the film in America led Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein to create a musical adaption of the play also titled *La Cage aux Folles*.

La Cage aux Folles was the first Broadway musical that featured two openly gay men as lead characters. *The March of the Falsettos* and *Dance a Little Closer* had broken the silence that traditionally surrounded "bachelor" characters on Broadway, but prior to 1983 no musical had dared to approach the subject of homosexuality directly for fear of alienating audiences. This appeared to be an unfounded fear as audiences embraced *La Cage aux Folles* and its bevy of cross-dressing chorines with wild abandon. The musical was clearly a throwback to the Golden Age of Broadway, and the plot of the show would not have been out of place in a 1920s screwball comedy. By creating a show that drew on

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La Cage aux Folles poster, 1973 Paris premiere

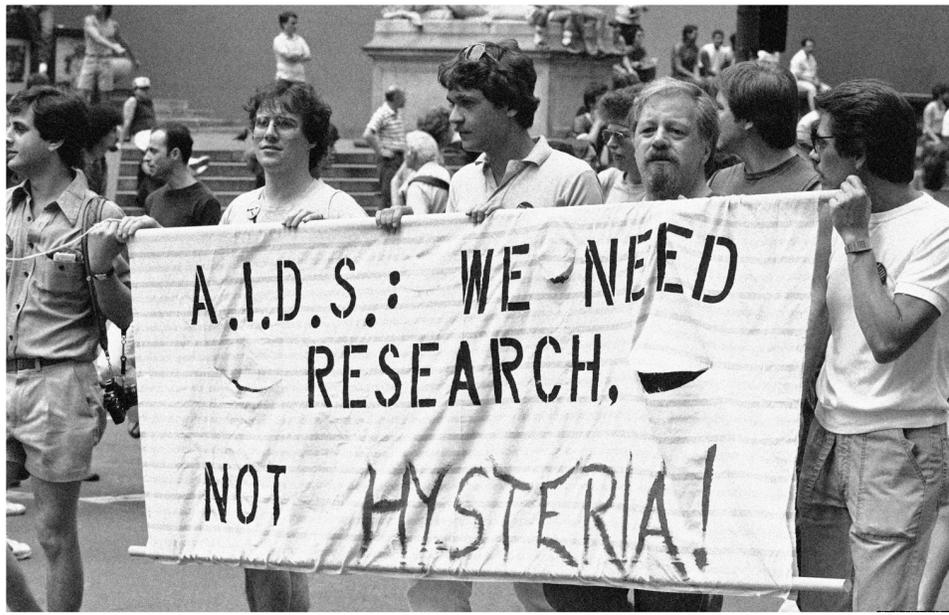


Jerry Herman, Harvey Fierstein, and Jean Poiret

THE STATE OF MUSICAL THEATRE CONTINUED

the best and most nostalgic aspects of musical theatre to surround a relatively sensitive subject, the writers were able to gain the acceptance of middle America as well as their edgier counterparts. Jerry Herman has often said that when writing *La Cage aux Folles*, "We were not out to change the world and wipe out bigotry overnight. We were just doing a musical." The show won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1984, beating Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. *La Cage aux Folles*

unifying the Broadway community offstage. In the spring of 1984, members of the *La Cage aux Folles* cast were the main event in one of the first fundraisers for this new and terrible disease. Harvey Fierstein remarks, "... This show is very special to me. We lost half the cast of the first production to AIDS, and the whole Broadway Fights Aids campaign was originated in that period of the show." Despite taking place during the rise of the AIDS epidemic, *La Cage aux Folles* ran for 1,761 performances on Broadway.



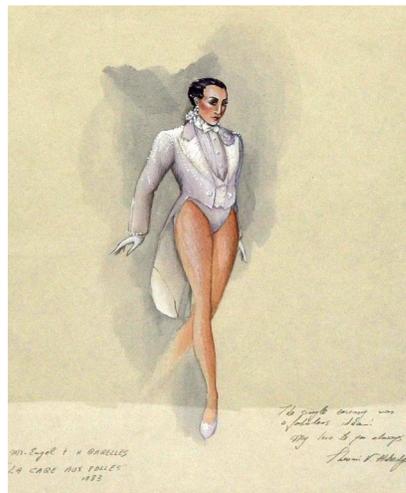
Jerry Herman and his collaborators carefully and artfully constructed a groundbreaking musical in such a way that it managed to be both family-friendly and risqué, balancing old-fashioned Broadway schmaltz with modern musical theatre. When asked about *La Cage aux Folles* Herman would often say, "If we had written a stronger, tougher political message into the material, the *New York Times* might have loved us more. But that would have given our show too narrow an appeal and it never would have found the huge universal audience that it did." *La Cage aux Folles* drew on the best aspects of musical theater and combined the romantic naiveté of the 1920s and 30s with the hummable tunes of the Golden Age of Broadway and the cheerful defiance of the rock musical to create a unique piece of musical theatre that was relevant to a modern audience and continues to resonate with audiences over 30 years after its creation.

did the impossible and managed to be "the most old-fashioned major musical Broadway has seen since *Annie*" and provide a voice for the gay community on Broadway; a voice that would be sorely needed in the days to come.

At the beginning of the 1980s reports began to surface of young men in California and New York being diagnosed with rare forms of cancer and pneumonia. The specific strains of illness found in these patients were supposed to be found in people with severely compromised immune systems or specific genetic profiles. However, these men were young and had previously been healthy. The only other factor that linked them was that they were all gay. By 1983, this mysterious disease had been given a name, AIDS. Just as *La Cage aux Folles* cheerfully broke down barriers onstage, it quickly became a force for



INTERESTING FACTS



One of Theoni V. Aldredge's designs for *La Cage*

- *La Cage aux Folles* is the only show to win the Tony for Best New Musical or Best Revival each time it was on Broadway.
- The original ensemble of *La Cage aux Folles* included two female members to help keep the audience on their toes.
- Advanced ticket sales for the original Broadway production of *La Cage aux Folles* totaled \$3.5 million.
- *La Cage aux Folles* was the first hit musical to contain a drag show within a musical.
- The cast album was released before the *La Cage aux Folles* opening night.
- George Hearn, the original Albin in *La Cage aux Folles*, auditioned for the show in full drag singing "My Heart Belongs to Daddy."
- Gloria Gaynor, the singer of "I Will Survive," released a cover of "I Am What I Am" in 1983.
- When asked if she has ever costumed a drag show, Theoni Aldredge, the original costume designer for *La Cage aux Folles*, says no. According to Theoni, "*La Cage aux Folles* isn't a drag show; it's a love story between two men, between a boy and a girl, between parents and children. And at the end, when everyone takes their bows, you know who the girls are and who the boys are. What's drag about that?"
- *La Cage aux Folles* is the last new musical with songs and music written by Jerry Herman.



Les Cagelles in the original 1983 Broadway production of *La Cage*. ©Martha Swope



CLICK HERE to watch Gloria Gaynor's rendition of "I Am What I Am"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zreTvtpTeoU>

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