

# Review: Torch Song Trilogy

What do we know of love? The first thing that comes to mind is need. We need to love and to be loved. In *Torch Song Trilogy*, the lead character's quest to fulfil that need is the basis of the story. Arnold Beckoff, a gay female impersonator, is shy and lonely. In the movie, he meets , loves and loses two lovers. He also has to struggle in his relationship with his mother who has never quite accepted his homosexuality. Tempered by his struggles, Arnold eventually grows into a strong and loving parent of a sixteen-year-old who is also gay.

*Torch Song Trilogy* is based on a collection of 3 one-act plays by Harvey Fierstein. His Broadway production of the trilogy won a Tony Award and in the film we can see why. It is a humorous and poignant story, full of touching vignettes and moments of black humor. Fierstein also takes on the role of Arnold and does some marvellous renditions of torch songs. His two lovers are played by Brian Kerwin and Matthew Broderick. Anne Bancroft rounds off the main cast as Arnold's tetchy and strong-willed mother.

The story opens as Mrs. Beckoff rushes all over the house shouting for him to come out. As she yanks open the closet door, the audience is right behind her when she discovers young Arnold dressed up in pearls and lipstick with a knowing smile on his face. In the next scene, the grown-up Arnold is cleaning off make-up in his dressing room. As he creams his face, he explains to us about

his past adventures in love. Each time he asks himself just how much he loved the man. "Not enough," he signs with his hands (one of his ex-lovers was deaf). After work, his colleague pushes him into a gay bar called The Stud. Arnold balks at the infamous "backroom" because he wants love not sexual gratification. Holding on tightly to his drink, he looks around until he catches the eye of a slim, blond man. Immediately, they look away from each other. A skittish exchange of glances later, Ed, a teacher played by Kerwin, takes Arnold home. The shy Arnold tries to make sure that their affair is perfect. In one scene, he wakes up early and stealthily shuts off Ed's alarm. A quiet dash to the bathroom to complete his toilette and he is back in bed. Then he switches the alarm back on and pretends to be asleep so that Ed can kiss him awake!

Their affair continues without strings on either side for two years. On the night of his birthday, Arnold discovers why Ed is afraid of commitment. Ed has not come to terms with being gay and so thinks of himself as bisexual. He tells Arnold that he is in love with Laurel. Arnold leaves after a big scene. Some time after, Ed visits Arnold at the club for the first time. As his colleagues quickly cleared out of the dressing-room, Arnold frantically scrubs his make-up off. Ed has been having nightmares and needs to talk. He is painfully eager to drive Arnold home. Arnold looks out at the audience and asks us if he should rebuff

Ed, but we know he will accept.

In the next part of the trilogy, Arnold is being hackled by some drunk young customers while doing a number. Finally, a fan in the next table grabs one of the drunk guys and offers to castrate him. The guy passes out and Arnold has to take him home. The next morning, Alan (a successful model played by Broderick) hurriedly leaves after staring at Arnold's bunny rabbit crockery. Arnold hides in the bathroom until he is gone. But soon Alan is appearing in unexpected places in his pursuit of Arnold who does not want to get hurt again. They fall in love and Arnold gives in with two stipulations: "First, I want children. And if there is going to be a pretty face around, it's going to be *mine*." (Alan is a successful model.) One night, Alan brings out some adoption papers and turns on the radio. As the song started, the DJ announces, "With all my love to Arnold, from Ellen..." "Alan, you ....!" yells Alan.

The phone rings and brings an curious invitation. Laurel, who is now married to Ed, wants Arnold and Alan to visit their farm. Alan overrides Arnold and accepts. He wants to see the competition. At the farmhouse, dinner is a touchy ordeal. The next day, the two couples are picnicking outside when Laurel suggests that Ed show Arnold the new-fangled machine they have in the barn. Arnold sends Alan off saying that he would "compare notes" with Laurel! In the barn, Alan lets himself be seduced by Ed. It turns out that Laurel had