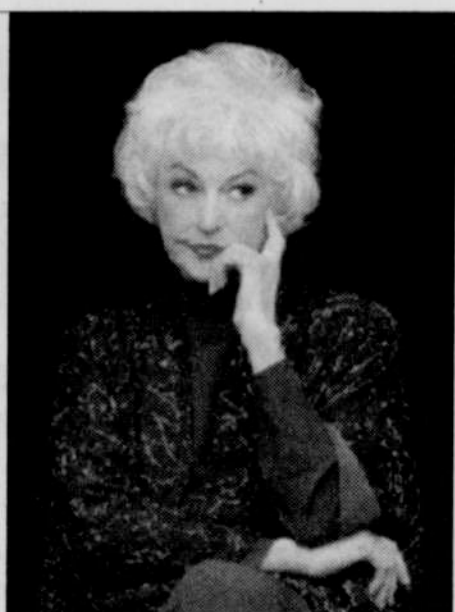




Bea Arthur on *Maude* (left) and in her one-woman Broadway show.

My new grandma

Bea Arthur reminisces about the *Golden age* of television

She's not a tough broad, but she plays one on TV.

Bea Arthur cemented her status as a gay icon with ball-busting roles on *Maude* and *The Golden Girls*, each of which earned her an Emmy Award. Rufus Wainwright even dropped a reference to "my new grandma Bea Arthur" in his 2001 song "California."

Today, the 82-year-old enjoys a quiet life of cooking, reading and hanging out with her dog, a Doberman named Emma. She also occasionally performs a one-woman show featuring a few lowbrow stories from her 50 years in the business mixed with her favorite songs.

I bonded with the Tony Award winner (for 1966's *Mame*, opposite Angela Lansbury) in advance of an upcoming gig in Salem.

Jim Radosta: Do you have any theories on why gay fans connect with you so strongly?

Bea Arthur: In every show that I've done on television—certainly in the sitcoms—we always fought injustice. My God, what the gay community has been suffering all these years is injustice!

Of course, there's something else, which has to do with being bigger than life. It's like opera—you know what I mean? I sort of have a feeling that Judy is looking down and saying, "Go, girl!"

JR: Are you surprised by the revived popularity of *The Golden Girls* now that it's available on DVD?

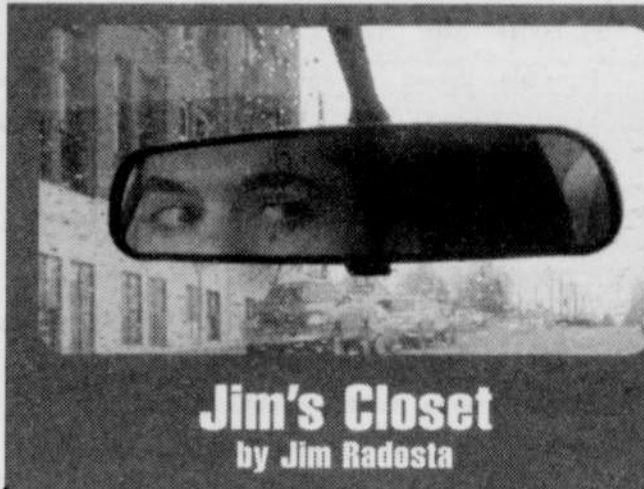
BA: It's still on television every 15 minutes all over the world! It's incredible. You know, we started it in '85—that's 20 years ago—and it's still on every day on Lifetime. I am very surprised. I really don't understand it. It's a cult hit.

JR: *The Golden Girls* and particularly *Maude* tackled so many controversial topics—homophobia, anti-Semitism, abortion. Were you aware at the time of how significant and groundbreaking this was?

BA: Absolutely not. First of all, television was not that old at the time, and it's only looking back on it that I realize what we did. Abortion was never discussed, let alone used as a plot. I think it's wonderful that we brought a lot of issues to the viewing public for the very first time in the context of the half-hour comedy.

JR: Did any of the pressure that came as a result of the 1972 abortion storyline affect you?

BA: I tell you, looking back on it now, the network probably tried to protect me. I did get a lot of mail, but I can't say that it was really hate mail. It was from people who genuinely feel that abortion is wrong. It was an eye-opener for me, because prior to that, I had never had an abortion, but it seemed to be a fact of life that any girl who got in trouble got an abortion. I never thought about it one way or another.



Jim's Closet
by Jim Radosta

JR: Are you politically active, or do you keep those opinions to yourself?

BA: That's the difference between me and the character of Maude. Norman Lear... was married to a militant feminist, and so he wrote the character of Maude based on Frances.

I have never been involved politically. I mean, I like to make damn sure I investigate things so that I know who to vote for and not to vote for, but I don't get that emotional about it. If you see me with petitions, it has to do with animal rights and the rights of foster children.

JR: What should people expect from your one-woman show?

BA: Ninety minutes of terrific theater. It's an entertainment—that's all it is. It's not totally autobiographical. There's a lot of terrific music, and I talk about things that have happened to me. I even tell a joke. It's like being in my living room.

JR: How long have you known the show's musical director, Billy Goldenberg?

BA: I've known Billy since 1980. That's how the whole thing started. Marilyn and Alan Bergman were being honored by the American Civil Liberties Union...and they got all their favorite performers to perform their favorite songs. Since they're just lyricists, they also got the composers of each of these to conduct. Billy had written *Queen of the Stardust Ballroom* with them, and I did three of the numbers from the show. We've been joined at the hip ever since.

JR: What's it like being a cultural icon?

BA: [Audiences] feel like I'm their friend because I'm in their living room every five minutes. When I come out at the beginning of my show, it's so nice because it's such a warm feeling. These people want to like me, because they already know me. Maybe some of them think I'm very assertive or whatever because of the characters that I've played, but that never bothers me. **JR**

BEA ARTHUR performs 7:30 p.m. Oct. 8 at Elsinore Theatre, 170 High St. S.E. in Salem. Tickets are \$30-\$60 from TicketsWest.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.

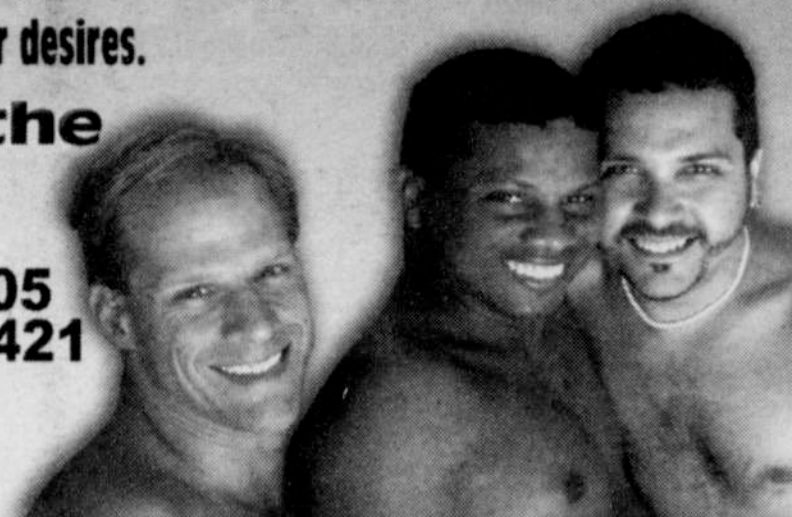
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