

He Is What He Is

A frank talk with tunesmith Jerry Herman

Think Broadway musical and you'll probably think of Jerry Herman. Every night, showstoppers from his trio of megahits, *Mame*, *Hello, Dolly!* and *La Cage aux Folles*, are sung around the world, including—ironically, since he's an openly gay liberal Democrat—at the notoriously nasty 1992 Republican National Convention. His string of awards and honors include multiple Tonys and Grammys; now, the 76-year-old is being honored with a candid, heartfelt documentary that airs New Year's Day on OPB. I recently spoke with Herman by phone.



Out Going
BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Floyd Sklaver: I read that you consider yourself a musical playwright. What do you mean by that?

Jerry Herman: I could not sit down right now and write a good song, just because you said write me a new song.... But if you gave me a book to read or a play and there was a wonderful character who had a goal in his or her life...I could write a song for that character.

FS: Which of your songs best reflects your life philosophy?

JH: "I'll Be Here Tomorrow" [from *The Grand Tour*]. And that's because I've been HIV-positive since 1983, and I'm so grateful that I was here at the right time to get a cocktail of medication that I take every morning and has kept me alive and really feeling great.

HELLO, DOLLY! • MAME
• MACK & MABEL •
LA CAGE AUX FOLLES



Jerry Herman would like to resurrect *Dear World* and is working on a new book.

FS: When did you find out you were HIV-positive?

JH: My partner at that time came home, he was diagnosed.... What year was that? I think it was '83 or '84.... And, of, course it was devastating. I really considered it a death sentence, and I made all my plans; you think about who to leave this to and all these terrible things. The first cocktail I was put on wore out its welcome. It made me sick, and I was sliding.... By 1990 I was not doing well and I started to look drawn and I really thought that was it.

FS: What motivated you to go public about your illness?

JH: I want anyone out there who is diagnosed to know that it is possible, and of course it depends on

the strain you have and on many things, but here I am—how many years is that—25 years later just feeling great and getting reports...with the word "undetectable" stamped on the report. That's become my favorite word. [Singing to the tune of Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable"] "Undetectable, that's how I am."

FS: You came of age before Stonewall. What was gay New York like in the late '50s and '60s?

JH: I lived in Greenwich Village, so I was surrounded by a gay-themed neighborhood and friends that I'd stop and chat with on the street. It was all very comfortable because I was in New York.... I had a lot of wonderful romances, and then I had this very serious relationship that I talk about in the film. When Marty [Finkelstein] died, I thought that part of my life was over, and then I met a man nine years ago from San Diego who was in Palm Springs and we instantly joined forces. We've had the most wonderful time. He's 61.

FS: If you could remake the movies of *Dolly* and *Mame*, whom would you cast?

JH: The original ladies. I would have used Carol Channing because she made it her own, and God knows Angela Lansbury should have been *Mame*. I did everything except stand on my head in Macy's window naked to make that happen.

FS: What creative ideas are knocking at your subconscious today?

JH: To resurrect *Dear World*, which I think is more pertinent today than it was when written. It's really an extension of the Gore documentary. [Singing] "Something has wounded you, dear world." I have a new book...and I'm on a crusade to get that show done.

FS: Finally, where does your optimism come from?

JH: I think it comes genetically from my mother, who is the most optimistic woman I ever knew, and I think it's something you're born with. I didn't make a decision at one time in my life that my glass was half full instead of half empty. It's just always been that way, and I'm very lucky.

FS: And how lucky I am, Jerry Herman, to have spoken with someone so charmingly open and *Out Going*. ☺

OPB presents WORDS AND MUSIC BY JERRY HERMAN 9:30 p.m. Jan. 1, 2008.

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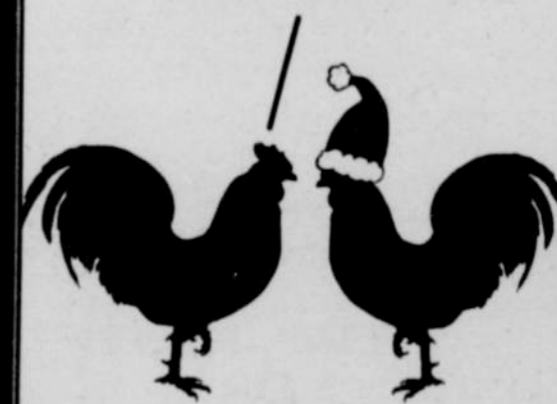
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