He Is What He Is

Showtune master Jerry Herman, the bard of Broadway, makes no apologies

February 1, 1997 By David Patrick Stearns

Jerry Herman was in typically ebullient spirits at the official first day of rehearsals for the latest revival of *Hello, Dolly!* No matter that Carol Channing was the star; the New York City press eagerly huddled around Herman as though he were J.D. Salinger emerging from seclusion. Though Herman has always been one of the more outgoing figures in musical theater, America's great tunesmith had been compositionally silent since 1983 and living far from Broadway, in the ultra-posh, sun-soaked Los Angeles neighborhood of Bel Air. I jokingly told him that a marauding band of musical-comedy terrorists were going to kidnap him, lock him in a room and force him to write new shows. Herman quit smiling and grew thoughtful. "That just might be what it would take," he said.

Was there something more to his creative silence than the usual "no interesting offers came my way" or "I was busy renovating houses in New York City and Key West"? The most obvious explanation was his HIV status (he's positive), which was ungracefully made public in 1992 by *New York Post* columnist Cindy Adams. His fear of falling ill during a new production and the death of his longtime partner kept him in virtual seclusion, opting for a quiet, low-stress existence.

But two years later, Herman is not so quiet. He has just completed a 10 song score for the TV special *Mrs. Santa Claus*, starring Angela Lansbury, that airs in early December. The $10 million production, shot on the back lot of Universal Studios, was an exhilarating experience. Suddenly, Herman is hungry for more.

"It's tough doing a film. You have to be ahead of the directors and actors and give them finished material. But I've been working at full speed and am ready to start another one," he says. "I want to tell everybody that it's not over."

Jerry Herman is sitting in his Bel Air mansion, a succession of elegantly decorated rooms all designed by him with a taste for the sumptuous, the well-upholstered and clean, classical lines. Each room harbors a secret stash of chocolate, his main creative stimulant. Like everyone who has ever worked in the theater, he's dismayed by the high costs of Broadway productions and the dwindling number of possible collaborators. But after years of turning down offers, he'd go back in a minute. The big change in his life is the protease inhibitor ritonavir, which in turn provided the impetus, and energy, for his recent autobiography, *Showtune* (Donald I. Fine Books/New York City).

"In *Showtune*, I wanted to tell stories about that fabulous era when there were 20 musicals a season. Mary Martin in one and Gwen Verdon in another. It was a very heady, exciting time, and I had a little part in it," he says. "I also wanted to tell the story honestly of a gay man in America who was comfortable with that persuasion. But almost more than the stories about Ethel Merman and Pearl Bailey, I wanted to tell people in my situation that there are medications now that can normalize your system. At the moment, I have no viral activity in my body. It's below zero. It's called 'out of range.' I can hardly believe I'm telling you this. I'm not a person who believes in miracles. I wasn't brought up to believe in miracles. But I think I do now. Not even in my wildest hopes and dreams would I ever have dared to think that I'd be here, working very hard."

Though *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame* and *La Cage aux Folles* have raised the spirits of millions, Herman believes the experimental study of protease inhibitors he participated in last year was more important: "My medical records were sent to the FDA along with many hundreds of others to help get the drug approved. I think that's the best thing I've done for this world."

His candor suggests a political awakening. He once avoided the talk-show circuit because he wanted to conceal his life as a gay man. Of course, he *did* write the gay anthem "I Am What I Am," and in recent years was parade marshal for Los Angeles' Gay Pride Parade. But the book -- and the interviews he'll do to promote it -- are his most public statements yet. "In the '60s, I wasn't openly gay because I wondered what people would think of me. I was in a business surrounded by gay people, and I was totally comfortable and accepted as an individual. It became very easy and natural for me (to be in the closet). But now I think that time and age and good sense have made me more public," he says. "I think it is good sense."

Such good sense has been hard-won, with the biggest trials occurring shortly after the 1983 opening of *La Cage aux Folles* (possibly one of the most trouble-free hits in Broadway history). From its first previews in Boston, *La Cage* was a hit. It swept the Tonys, edging out Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. Most important, it was a breakthrough for gay consciousness in mainstream entertainment. "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," Herman writes in his book. "We were not gung-ho about delivering a political message. We were not out to change the world and wipe out bigotry overnight. We were just doing a musical."

Nonetheless, the show was a much-needed pat on the back to the gay community, which was just beginning to fathom the horror of the AIDS epidemic. In fact, members of the chorus of *La Cage* initiated a number of backstage fundraisers that became the seed of today's Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, a $6 million-a-year theatrical fundraising network.

It was yet another good-cheer chapter in the seemingly effortless life of Jerry Herman, the lad who grew up in Jersey City. The guy who received the help and encouragement of *Guys and Dolls* composer Frank Loesser. And the man who, by age 30, had a major Broadway hit with *Milk and Honey*. A winning streak that included *Hello, Dolly!* and *Mame* was then followed by a trio of box-

office failures -- *Mack and Mabel*, *Dear World* and *The Grand Tour* -- which all slumped despite some of Herman's best efforts.

But with *La Cage*, Jerry Herman was once again a winner. And not just artistically.

After years of affairs and flings, Herman settled down with Marty Finkelstein, whom he had met at a Christmas party. Herman writes about him rhapsodically in *Showtune*: "I didn't have to play the big shot with him because he truly respected and cared for me. Being considerate of Marty taught me to talk to everybody like a person, not like an expert. I found that helped me in all my relationships, too. He taught me how to listen to other people's opinions and how to respect them, even when I didn't particularly agree with them. He was a wonderful person, and he was very, very good for me."

They started their own business renovating old Victorian houses in Key West. They restored 11 and won numerous architecture and restoration awards. But after being together five years, Finkelstein came down with a bronchial infection that wouldn't go away.

Herman shows me a photo of a handsome, blond, mustachioed man. "Just an adorable guy," he begins. "Bright. Charming. He had a family that totally opened their arms to me. They were thrilled that Marty met me. I could've found hostility, and I found just the opposite." After seven and a half years together, Finkelstein died of AIDS at the age of 36. "When I saw the grief of his mother, that hit me more than my own grief."

For years Herman seemed to keep to himself and a close circle of friends. "Inwardly, I was empty. I like to write happy, romantic songs, and I didn't feel romantic and happy. I didn't feel like a whole person. Then I was frightened by my own diagnosis, which came on the heels of Marty's death." The news prompted his move to Los Angeles. "If I wasn't going to be well, why deal with a New York winter?"

Herman says he would have written two other shows in that period, without question. "I wanted very much to work with *La Cage* collaborator Arthur Laurents (librettist on *Gypsy* and *West Side Story*) again. He and I began talking about a wonderful premise. An original. But it came at a time when I began to see my [blood] numbers spiraling down. I never followed through on our meetings. And I was offered *Miracle on 34th Street*, as well as *Tootsie*."

Jerry Herman bringing *Tootsie* to Broadway? What could have prevented that? "I saw myself as having to perhaps bow out at a crucial moment. And I wanted to be able to be there for everybody if I promised to. I would love to have done *Tootsie*. I was positive that I wasn't going to write another show," he says.

Herman's writing process has always been quirky -- unstoppable when conditions are right, but nonexistent when they're not, even with the best chocolate in the world: "I've started projects where nothing came out. One was *Mother of Burlesque* for Carol Channing. We love her and cherish her, and it sounded fun. But I looked at the scenario and read it and...nothing. Nothing. I don't know how to write characters that don't have anything important or interesting to say. That's

why I haven't written 20 shows. You spend the rest of your life with these characters. Mame Dennis is in my life. Thank God she is; I adore her. But the point is, you don't write something and walk away from it."

Nor can he write songs for the sake of writing songs. He claims he could never write a pop tune -- even if the musical-comedy terrorists did lock him in a room. Yet, strangely enough, he didn't feel the least bit rusty writing *Mrs. Santa Claus*. Songs simply poured out of him. Although that may sound vaguely metaphysical, Herman explains that songwriting, for him, is simply a crystallization of stray thoughts and feelings on a given subject. And it's becoming increasingly clear what subjects stimulate him: He loves period pieces, or at least exotic locales such as post-World War II Israel in *Milk and Honey*. He also loves strong, stylish women who break out of their constricted lives. In fact, Mrs. Santa Claus -- who is sick of her husband taking all the credit for Christmas and decides to go south, to New York City during the ragtime era -- sounds just a bit like Dolly Levi.

While some quarters of the theater world are puzzled at the success of Andrew Lloyd Webber, no such questions greet Herman. His hallmark isn't simply hummability. He has an almost unerring instinct for whether a moment should be sung or spoken. For example, he knew that Dolly Levi's "Money is like manure" speech wouldn't sound right sung, so he left it alone. He also knows where to place songs, resulting in shows that are classic in their construction, solid in their dramaturgy. That's why Herman's shows do so well with summer stock and amateur companies. They're so sturdy they don't need star performances to pull them off and so sincere even the glitziest show-biz moments are emotionally genuine and don't become dated. The songs themselves are always rooted in their characters, so well-constructed they stand on their own.

Now that his kind of music is enjoying renewed mainstream success, thanks to the Disney-produced animated musicals such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*, young composers inevitably find their way to Herman to ask advice. "I'm very honest with them, and I tell them it's much more difficult today. But I have to encourage people. How could I not want someone else to have the kind of life I've had? It's been -- if you'll pardon the expression -- a fairy tale."

Nearly every great Broadway musical diva alive in the 1960s played Dolly Levi -- Channing, Martin, Merman, Martha Raye and others. He nearly resurrected Judy Garland's flagging career when he put her in the Broadway version of *Mame*. "That sense of humor!" he recalls of Garland. "The world doesn't know how delicious it was."

Nearly all of Herman's darkest moments have had happy endings. During the gestation of *Hello, Dolly!*, Herman was mercilessly abused by flamboyant producer David Merrick. Despite that, he turned out a show that put him on the Broadway map. He was heartbroken over the flop of *Mack and Mabel* because he considers it the best score of his life, but the show was a hit this past winter in London and will travel to Australia. America may come later. "I'm being very cautious. It's been such an amazing turnaround, I don't want to blow it. New York can wait for *Mack and Mabel*."

All of this during a time when he thought he was retiring. Another dark time closed out with a happy ending. Now, the musical-comedy terrorists won't have reason to storm the gates of his Bel

Air mansion. Says Herman, “I haven’t yet hit my stride.”

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