He Still Is What He Is

Broadway’s favorite songwriter opens a new window

November 1, 1998 By Manjula Martin

Jerry Herman, the songwriter behind the Broadway smashes Hello, Dolly!, Mame *and* La Cage aux Folles*, can sleep soundly at night with the certainty that he made history with his parade of fabulously entertaining yet emotionally searing characters. He speaks confidently, with the air of an artist satisfied with his work—one part satisfaction, one part glory and one part sheer delight that he has succeeded in entertaining millions.*

This peace was hard won. In 1992, after Herman’s HIV diagnosis was broadcast by loose-lipped New York Post gossip maven Cindy Adams, Herman’s fear of falling ill made him seriously consider packing it all in. He fled to the posh California hills, far from the Great White Way. But due to what he calls miraculous success on protease inhibitors, Herman changed his tune and returned to the bright lights of the big city.

When we spoke in August, 66-year-old Herman (last seen gracing the cover of POZ’s February 1997 issue) was just closing a run of his Broadway revue, An Evening With Jerry Herman, in which the artist performs and discusses his life’s work. Herman answered his phone at 11 a.m., breathless and bubbly after an early-morning workout and a rapid-fire industry meeting. The star speaks quickly, with a timeless sense of Broadway class and a faint New Jersey accent, peppering his down-to-business tone with plenty of “hon”s and “sweetie”s.

Last time POZ spoke with you, you had moved from New York City to Bel Air, in search of a quiet, relaxing retirement. Now, you’re staying in a Manhattan hotel room and starring in a Broadway revue. What happened?

All I can tell you is that I’m 66 years old and I’m doing eight shows a week. In each, I play the piano for two hours straight, I sing, I talk, I’m out there under grueling hot lights, and I’m having the time of my life. I’m doing what a 30-year-old does. I’m working hard and loving it, and I’m full of energy. Sometimes I remind myself that only three years ago I thought it was all over.
I feel like it’s time once again for me to say thank you—which may sound crass, but it’s really the most appropriate expression—to all the people who created the protease inhibitors. Otherwise I would not be having this conversation with you. Those pills are my life preservers.

What medications are you on right now?

I started out on ritonavir [Norvir] and that's what got my viral load down to undetectable. My doctor moved me to nelfinavir [Viracept] about a year ago, along with 3TC and nevirapine [Viramune] and a lot of the usual prophylactic stuff. And my viral load is still undetectable! I don't know if it's going to continue at this wonderful rate, but it doesn't matter because it has given me a chance to do this show and all this time I didn't expect.

I also had triple bypass surgery in September 1997 to unclog some arteries. It went very well and my recovery has been swift and complete.

But honestly, Jerry, how do you get the energy to do eight shows a week?

The energy I need to maintain this sort of schedule just comes to me—it's just a part of my life. I get up every morning and get on a treadmill, and I swim. I'm at the peak of my health, and the audience knows it. It's incredibly rewarding to do this show. I decided to go back to Broadway mainly because of the obvious need to celebrate and share my good fortune. When you think you're dying and you make plans to leave, and then you suddenly realize you're healthy—well, that's cause for celebration, isn't it? I've had two standing ovations at every performance.

So what's next? Are you planning on keeping up this frenetic career revival? Are you writing anything new?

Well, this year I'm doing this show and then next year there will be something else, and my life goes on. It's hard to say what will present itself. I haven't found anything new to write, nothing that makes me jump up and say, "I have to do this!" But the most interesting thing about the theater is that your work goes on without you really having to do anything about it. Once you've written a show like Dolly, you know it will be done for the next hundred years, whether you're around to see it or not.

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