The Way They Weren’t

Barbra Streisand’s lost her place in Larry Kramer’s Heart

August 1, 1996 By Erik Meers

In the end, it was a phone call that did the trick. After 10 years of pushing Barbra Streisand to make his 1985 bombshell AIDS play, *The Normal Heart*, into a feature film, playwright Larry Kramer mentioned in passing to a *Variety* reporter during a phone interview about *The Birdcage* that he wished the diva would just direct the movie rather than trying to produce it as well. A day after Kramer’s comments appeared in the industry bible, Streisand issued a statement that she was bowing out of the project. Two weeks and hundreds of phone calls later, Kramer finalized an agreement with *Midnight Cowboy* director John Schlesinger to start shooting *The Normal Heart* for the big screen in September.

Kramer told *POZ* Biz about the deal before it was made public in May. “It’s truly an accident. I’ve never had so many phone calls in my life. Studios. Stars. Producers. You name it,” Kramer said. “The gay mafia decided they were going to get the movie made.” While most of the details were still secret at press time, the curmudgeonly hero of AIDS activism said that a major studio is involved and that “the money is not a problem.” Hollywood veterans David Picker and Laurence Mark will produce the film at a cost of $12 to $14 million.

So where does his relationship with Streisand stand now? “She’s more pissed at me than I’m pissed at her,” Kramer says. "I didn’t want her to leave. But she got very annoyed by the *Variety* piece."

Streisand, who now is furiously at work on her new film, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, publicly lamented having to pass on the project. In a statement to the press, Streisand said, "Larry Kramer and I worked on this project together many years ago, until at a certain point he decided to take it elsewhere. A couple of years ago, after Larry unsuccessfully tried to set it up, he came back to me and asked if we could once again collaborate on it. I said yes -- although I was in the midst of developing my current film...I fully intended to be in production with *The Normal Heart* this fall, but unfortunately my post-production schedule makes that impossible."

“Oh, horseshit,” Kramer grouses. But what do you really think, Larry? "Her departure has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I love her, but she pissed on this project for 10 years. She had other things that she thought were more important: The first was *Nuts*, the second her concert tour, the third *The Mirror Has Two Faces*."

Ironically, Kramer and Streisand are not so much of an odd couple as it might superficially seem. The uncompromising temperament that Streisand has shown in abundance on the *Mirror* set (which was grist for the gossip pages throughout the winter) is precisely the quality that Kramer wanted in a director for the film. Indeed, Kramer has made something of a career of playing the unwelcome messenger. In the late 1970s, Kramer's novel *Faggots*, which painted a most unflattering picture of a group of narcissistic and sex-crazed gay men, led to his ostracism from more than a few fashionable New York City social circles. *The Normal Heart*, Kramer's account of his battles with the first leaders of Gay Men's Health Crisis (which he co-founded), brings a *Faggots*-esque frankness to the first desperate days of the AIDS epidemic.

At the end, though, Streisand had been showing signs of buckling -- a mortal sin in Kramer's eyes. "I think that she was looking for an excuse to get out. She had it for 10 years. If she hasn't made it, there's something about it that's scared her. If she had made the movie in 1986, when she optioned it for the first time, the movie would have been out in 1987. Then an awful lot of people would have seen it, and I hope been moved by it. Perhaps it might have affected the course of history. That's why I was willing to put up with all of the Sturm und Drang that comes with working with her. She became increasingly nervous with showing the intimacy that is in the script between two men. She kept going on about how she wanted a gay *The Way We Were*," Kramer grumps. "I got all the Sturm und Drang but not the movie."

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