Heart Transplant

Eat yours out, Tom Cruise -- Sharon Stone just rescued Larry Kramer's baby

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Given Barbra Streisand's obsession with her appearance, she may never have been right to play the wheelchair-bound Dr. Emma Brookner, a starring role in the movie version of Larry Kramer's epochal play, The Normal Heart. But since Streisand withdrew from the project last spring, it seems the fortunes of the ill-fated big-screen dramatization of the founding of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) -- already 10 years in the making -- may finally have turned around.

Shortly after Streisand left the movie, heavyweight Hollywood producers Laurence Mark and David Picker snapped up the rights. Then, Midnight Cowboy director John Schlesinger signed on to direct. And late last year, Sharon Stone, the diva -- slash -- chair of a three-year fundraising drive for the American Foundation for AIDS Research, announced she had agreed to play the Brookner part -- provided her schedule could be accommodated.

"The minute that Sharon said she was going to do it, the money miraculously appeared," Larry Kramer says. "She was great in Casino. I think she's a terrific actress." Meanwhile, Streisand continues to gripe in the press about her treatment at Kramer's hands. "You know, people think it's so easy for a so-called big star to raise money," Streisand recently told the online service CompuServe. "It's just not true. Every movie I've been passionate about, like Yentl and The Prince of Tides, I have had the worst time getting made. I was very hurt by the way I was pushed out of a project that I had worked on since 1985 for nothing."

But Kramer, who gained notoriety and many enemies with his first book, Faggots, an unsparing (but very funny) look at A-gays in and around New York City in the late '70s, isn't losing any sleep over Babs' hurt feelings.

So while Heart's female star appears to have fallen in place, Kramer and the film's producers are focusing on casting a male lead. Kramer says he wants a "Dustin Hoffman circa 15 years ago" to play the part of Bruce Niles, head of the GMHC-esque group. Streisand had tried to cast against type with either of the British thespians Ralph Fiennes or Kenneth Branagh. At press time, no actor was confirmed.

If all goes as planned, Kramer will return to Fire Island this summer to shoot scenes for the movie. Even if he gets there after the Fourth of July, his presence alone should provide plenty of fireworks.

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