



by Jonathan Tolins
**Buyer &
Cellar**

RW *renaissance*
THEATERWORKS

Audience Guide

BARBRA'S PASSION FOR DESIGN

Barbra Streisand's book *My Passion For Design* is a coffee table design tome. Filled with opulent photos taken by the author herself, it was, in fact, the inspiration for this play. In the book, which was published in 2010, Streisand takes stock not of her career or personal life, but of something almost as important: her sprawling Malibu mansion and compound, every detail of which seems to have been carefully and obsessively considered by her personally. Bursting with baroque upholstery, bespoke accessories, and centuries-old carpets, *My Passion For Design* shows what happens when curated and correct "good taste" clashes with the no-expense-spared, ostentation of its author.

Barbra's design book quickly emerged as a cult classic – and inspired this play which became an unlikely off-Broadway hit. The zaniest chapter in *My Passion for Design* depicted Streisand's basement, which was like no other subterranean storeroom. To house various collectibles acquired over the years, Streisand created a main street's worth of faux old-timey shops. The basement features a doll shop, a dress boutique, a gift "shoppe" and other fake emporia, complete with a cobblestone street for strolling.



A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT, JONATHAN TOLINS

FROM WHATSONSTAGE.COM



When my husband brought the book home from our local library, we were gobsmacked by the sight of this mall built for one. Thinking about the staff Streisand might hire to attend her shopping expeditions, I wondered, "How would you like to be the guy who works down there?" That was the most important joke I'd ever made – because this surreal and downright wacky aspect of Streisand's home inspired my play, *Buyer & Cellar*. While I had enjoyed a disappointing Broadway debut twenty years earlier (*The*

Twilight of the Golds), and a moderate off-Broadway run a decade after that (*The Last Sunday in June*), *Buyer & Cellar* was every playwright's elusive dream: both a critical and commercial success.

The play follows an unemployed actor, Alex More, who takes a job as a fake storekeeper in the underground mall. When the lady of the house comes down to "shop," the two haggle over imaginary prices until a complicated friendship is born. At one point, my imagined Streisand explains why her first book is not an autobiography: "What's left to say, right?" Apparently, a lot – because *My Name is Barbra* will clock in at nearly a thousand pages.

To write my play, I devoured *My Passion for Design*, honing in on every detail that seemed to offer insight into the author's inner life. Envisioning myself (or my stand-in, Alex) in dialogue with Streisand, I tried to treat her just like any other fictional character I write. When this process works, you really do feel like you've come to know another person deeply — if only through imagination. In this case, I could feel how the task of perfecting her home and displaying it to the world might have provided a very necessary outlet for this star's restless energy, as well as her need for validation. When the play premiered in 2013, I learned that not only had Streisand heard about the show, but she suspected I had a spy on her staff feeding me details. (Barbra, if you're reading this, I swear there was more than enough material in the book.)

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Gay men helped shape Barbra's look, sound and stage presence at the beginning of her career. It's no surprise that she would then go on to become such a quintessential gay icon.



In the early 1960s, when Streisand was just starting out, gay audiences instinctively recognized something very familiar about her, a shared sensibility. That was only logical, given that her sensibility had been nurtured by gay men, after all. And this was hardly a new phenomenon. Virtually every other significant gay icon had followed the same path.

Almost to a dame -- from Mae West to Lady Gaga -- the greatest gay icons have been molded early in their careers by gay mentors and collaborators. Streisand (and her fellow icons) first had to have that certain X factor, that magical star quality, as well as heaps of talent. Without any of that, even the best gay Svengalis couldn't do much. But when we go looking for the reasons why certain stars -- Streisand, West, Gaga, Judy Garland, Madonna, Marilyn Monroe -- have such appeal for gay men and inspire such devoted gay followings, I think we have to pay careful consideration to who and what influenced them in their formative years.

The young Streisand was surrounded by a triumvirate of gay men who contributed enormously to how she was first presented to the world. Her boyfriend Barry Dennen (who would later come out as gay) was one of the first to recognize the gift of Barbra's voice and encourage her to pursue work as a singer. Dennen introduced Barbra to the music of all the legendary chanteuses, from Helen Kane to Mabel Mercer to Billie Holliday to Judy Garland, while helping her develop her singing style and stage banter. Barbra's pal Terry Leong taught her about fashion, creating her whimsical, thrift-shop, avant-garde clothing sense. Another pal, Bob Schulenberg, polished her look, aiming for a more "goddess-like" style and creating Barbra's signature eye makeup and early hairstyles. So it was this heavily gay-influenced creature who walked onto the stage at the Lion, a gay bar, and wowed everybody present.





Word spread quickly through New York's gay communities that this 'Streisand kid' was special. Soon she was dazzling at other nightclubs with large lavender followings, including the Bon Soir and the Blue Angel. Among those in the audience who recognized something magical about Barbra was Arthur Laurents, one of the least disguised gay men to ever work in the theater. Laurents cast Streisand in *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* and refined her persona even more. This was the show that launched Barbra on her swift rise to the top.



With the passing of Whitney Houston and now Donna Summer, I've been thinking about why divas are so important to the gay community. I have my own case of diva worship: I adore Diana Ross, Cher, and Oprah. I call their birthdays the "Gay High Holy Days" and celebrate. As a young boy I would take my sister's black tights and put them over my head and sing "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves" into a hairbrush, pretending to be Cher!

I joke that if you were what I call "Gay Orthodox," you must consider it a Gay High Holy Day when a diva comes to town. You must commit to closing your business and taking the day off. You must treat the day as a Sabbath or else consider yourself a sinner. Gay neighborhoods will be ghost towns as we flock to stadiums -- our places of worship -- for every Diana Ross, Cher, Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, Madonna, Janet Jackson, and Dolly Parton concert. Today's younger gay men will flock to Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, Jessica Simpson, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Christina Aguilera.

One can never forget, of course, dearly departed divas such as the late, great Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and the original grande dame of divas: Judy Garland. Although not every gay boy or man worships divas, a good many do. Why is that?

There are many theories. In *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Daniel Harris suggests that "at the very heart of gay diva worship is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity." Harris feels that we gay men live vicariously through divas who snare the handsome heterosexual men, and that we like to imagine ourselves in their place. He equates diva worship with watching football and says that it's actually just as unfeminine as football: "It is a bone-crushing spectator sport in which one watches the triumph of feminine wiles over masculine walls of a voluptuous and presumably helpless damsel in distress single-handedly moving down a lineup of hulking quarterbacks who fall dead at her feet."

Time even addressed diva worship in a review of Judy Garland's final concert on August 18, 1967, at New York's Palace Theatre. The article read, "A disproportionate part of her nightly claque seems to be homosexual. The boys in the tight trousers roll their eyes, tear at their hair and practically levitate from their seats, particularly when Judy sings ['Over the Rainbow']." The article also quoted a psychiatrist who said, "Judy was beaten up by life, embattled and ultimately had to become more masculine. She has the power that homosexuals would like to have, and they attempt to attain it by idolizing her."

**BARBRA THE
GAY ICON**
FROM HUFFPOST.COM
AND TIMEOUT.COM

**DIVA WORSHIP
AND GAY MEN**
By Dr. Joe Kort,
PhD. for Huffpost
(Con't)

On closer examination, we can see there is something decidedly masculine about these divas. They have a hardened, sometimes aggressively feminine side. In their performance mode, they are almost as hyperfeminine as drag queens: Diana Ross' big exaggerated hair, for example, or Cher's heavily beaded gowns and overly glittering eye shadow.

Another theory I hold strongly is that these divas are our stand-in mothers. Jewish clients and friends of mine have told me that Barbra Streisand saved their lives. Without her movies and songs, they couldn't have survived their childhoods. Many of these men had self-absorbed mothers who were unavailable emotionally, so what better surrogate Jewish mother than Streisand? She is already unavailable in many ways, so clients can worship her and fulfill some needs that their mothers cannot. These diva-mommies will never let us down; they are whoever we want them to be. They're our mother shadows.

My theory is that in our early lives, our inability to attach and identify with men may prompt us to try to escape into the feminine realm to avoid the shame and fear of being compared unfavorably with other males. Although this is true of both gay and straight men, straight men bring these issues to their female partners. Not having woman as partners, we turn to our divas.

Whatever the reason, these divas mean so much to us as gay men, I am thankful to them for giving us an escape from the pain of growing up gay. I admire their perseverance and their acceptance of their gay audiences. For me, they make the world a more colorful and better place.



Chutzpah.....Its meaning is usually defined by a series of synonyms, including nerve, gall, audacity, supreme self-confidence, and conspicuous boldness.

Farbissina.....From the adjective Farbissen meaning Stubborn, truculent, bitter, resentful, dogged.

Meeskite.....Describes something that is homely or ugly. It's used to denote a type of ugliness that, paradoxically, endears someone or something to the observer.

Mensch.....A mensch is "a person of integrity and honor". It's an informal term used to describe someone who is good, kind, thoughtful, and honorable. It's often used as a high compliment to describe someone with rare and valuable qualities.

Schmattas.....The word "schmatta" is an Americanism that originated in the 1965-70 period. It comes from the Yiddish word shmate, which means "rag" or "ragged piece of clothing", and the Polish word szmata, which has the same meaning.

Tallis.....Ashkenazic: Singular. Male fringed prayer shawl

Tchotchkes.....Plural. From the Slavic word for trinket. Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Belarusian each have their own very similar adaptations. It was later adopted into Yiddish slang as tshatsшке, and has long been used by the US.