

CABARET SCENES

YOUR
NIGHTCLUB
GUIDE

April
2011

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Steven
Brinberg

45
Cabaret
Reviews

Ralph
Lampkin, Jr.

Stephen
Sondheim
Book
Review



CATCHING UP WITH

Steven Brinberg

A First-Rate Second Hand Rose

By **Joel Benjamin**



These pages
(from left)
His Name Is Barbra
Simply Steven
His Name Is Barbra, Two
"Papa, can you hear me?"
(little Steven and
big daddy)



Kerrin Anne

W

hen

you
observe
Steven
Brinberg
as
Barbra
Streisand,
it's
the
subtlety,

not the spectacle that impresses. Brinberg's Barbra is the product of years of research, observation and attention to detail, years

At right (from top)
Steven Brinberg with Lainie Kazan
With Franc D'Ambrosio Steve/Babs/Mic
SB and Douglas Sills
And with Audra McDonald
Opposite page Steven and Tony Goldwyn
At table d'hote with Matt Cavanaugh David Burnham Daniel Reichard
Brinberg and Omar Sharif Jr.
And with Whoopi Goldberg

of performing her songs and keeping up with all the ups and downs of the Diva's life. Watch the glances at audience members and the little telling looks at the accompanist. This is the kind of body language that only a dyed-in-the-wool diva can pull off, someone who needs to be in control of every single detail. The fingernails are just the right length and color—not exaggerated—the lipstick perfect, every eyelash in



Andrew Delicata



proper Streisand place. The wigs and dresses are carefully considered. Martha Graham once famously declared in her brilliant documentary *A Dancer's World*, that, unless she saw the character she was about to portray staring back at her in her dressing room mirror, her preparation wasn't complete. I imagine that the same applies to Steven Brinberg's transformation into La Streisand before each performance, as he goes from boyishly handsome young actor/singer with a rich voice to three-dimensional, world-famous personality. This talented young man actually merges with this character and becomes ageless, timeless and, in a way, genderless. At a casual meeting in a neighborhood Starbucks, Steven and I discussed the changes he has experienced since he was featured in *Cabaret Scenes* in 2000, a time when he was hard-pressed to cast off the label of

"drag artist." Charmingly, he couldn't repress his enthusiasm as he proudly recounted how his standing in show business has risen markedly so that now he's respected enough to be the go-to-guy when the real Mrs. Brolin is not available. Streisand's management hired Brinberg to sing at a Donna Karan birthday party, with a little "direction" from Barbra as what Steven should say. The "direction" came to Steven through Richard Jay-Alexander who has worked with Streisand on her recent concert tours.

Even more astonishing is that Marvin Hamlisch, composer of several of Streisand's hit songs and her longtime friend, has worked with Brinberg in symphony concerts in many cities, with Raleigh and Seattle coming up soon. "Marvin is the most regular guy I ever met who has Oscars, Tonys, Emmys and Grammys! He feels like a relative—totally down to earth. Once in Milwaukee, he told

us about a place with great custard and took us there! We've done over a dozen U.S. cities now. When we did the first one, he wanted me to pull off the wig à la *La Cage aux Folles* and I refused. He realized I was right. Now, instead, I come on as me for the finale—which goes over very well."

He cites singing at Stephen Sondheim's 70th birthday celebration and making him laugh as, perhaps, his biggest thrill. What prompted the laugh was Brinberg/Streisand saying: "Steve wrote special lyrics for me for my concert. And I'm having *The Broadway Album* remixed and remastered and need some more lyrics. So, we'll talk, Steve!"

Brinberg also performed at a party for writer Kenny Solms (who wrote for *The Carol Burnett Show*.) In attendance were Catherine Zeta-Jones, Michael Douglas, Joan Rivers and Lauren Bacall, to whom he said, "Hi, Mom!" as he made his entrance. (Bacall played Streisand's mom in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*.) Composer Larry Grossman (*Minnie's Boys*,

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Steven Brinberg


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Goodtime Charley) was the accompanist. Joan said to Steven, "You sound just like her, but you know that!" and Zeta-Jones wanted to have him sing for her parents in Wales...in lieu of taking a photo. Instead, she opened her bag and gave Steven her bottle of perfume!

Brinberg has appeared on stage in *Funny Girl*. He was one of the brides in a concert version of the show held at the New Amsterdam Theatre, home of the original



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I think.**



Ziegfeld Follies, in 2002. The event benefited The Actors Fund. In 2009, he did get to play Fanny Brice in a benefit reading in Asbury Park, New Jersey. In the cast were Loni Ackerman, Harvey Evans and, introducing the show, was Lainie Kazan,

who was Streisand's understudy on Broadway and played the role of the showgirl, Vera, in that production.

If anyone needs further evidence of his growing acceptance, one has only to take a glance at his 2007 CD *Simply Barbra – The Duets Album* (LMLmusic.com). He sings a terrific range of music, with a cross-section of performers renowned in their own right, such as the inimitable Kaye Ballard, the late Claiborne Cary, Mimi Hines, Heather Mac Rae, Hugh Panaro and KT Sullivan. Brinberg clearly has arrived in the equivalent of musical high society. Although he is essentially imitating Streisand's voice and inflections, he somehow makes the interpretations on the CD heartfelt and real.

He spoke at length about growing up in nice, middle class Riverdale "watching and listening to Barbra. She became such a part of me that, when I began playing her, I didn't have to go back and study her. It became innate." How does he keep the act interesting and fresh for himself and the audience? "It's easy to keep it fresh because each audience is different and I always change some of the songs, always including ones she has yet to do, as well as her hits and ones that weren't hers."

I asked him if he hit any bumps or miscalculations along the way. After some thought, he replied, "I haven't had many bumps doing Barbra—and certainly have refused to put a bump on my nose! I do regret a few outfits and wigs. And, even though you and others have complimented me on my makeup, it's still my least favorite part of the show." After a little pause, he added, "And I regret a few directors here and there...they know who they are!"

He continued: "In Scotland once, a fire alarm went off and we had to evacuate the theater in the middle of the show. I never, ever break character during a show, but was forced to in this case before the show resumed."

How does he balance honoring and

**From top
Steven with Ken Page
With Pat Susuki
Jamming with
Marvin Hamlisch
SB with
Lucie Arnaz
And with
Bernadette Peters**

satirizing his vision of Barbra? "It is a balance between showing my affection for Barbra



one is true, that one isn't, that one is, etc."

Since not all his appearances are in with-it, sophisticated towns like New York or L.A., I asked if any audience members ever gave him a hard time. "I've had a few hecklers in my time and that can always be awkward, though I can answer



and poking fun at Barbra at the same time. I'm sure she'd never say, 'I won't be directing this new movie of Gypsy...not officially,' but she'd get why that is funny, I think. I love when people will ask me about certain stories I told onstage and ask if this or that were true. Usually, it's this



them in character, which is a plus!"

When pressed, he went on to talk about other famous figures, female and male, he just

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Steven Brinberg

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might work on for inclusion in future shows, including Julie Andrews and Anthony Newley. He currently includes a quick succession of uncanny vocal simulations in his act, going swiftly from Ethel Merman to Cher to Eartha Kitt and even that famous Streisand/Neil Diamond duet. The latter has to be seen and heard to be believed, a tour de force of timing that almost convinces you that both legendary performers are, indeed, singing together!

In due course, our conversation veered toward a discussion of musical comedies, prompted by the very loud whispers in entertainment gossip columns concerning the possibility of Streisand doing a film or TV version of *Gypsy*. Would he consider doing a musical? And, if so, in what persona? He was a tad coy about the subject, perhaps because he has so many performances coming up. I did uncover a bone of contention he has with the New York City Center *Encores!* powers-that-be. He has a little problem with their

choices of shows and even more with their casting. I have to say that his suggestions for shows and stars are quite astute. How about Glenn Close in *Woman of the Year*? *Minnie's Boys* with Bette Midler (Heaven!)? Or Donna McKechnie in *Ballroom*? Even better: *Wildcat* with Cheyenne Jackson and Charles Busch in the Lucille Ball role? Maybe there's a producer/director lurking inside Steven Brinberg? (Just like you-know-who!)

For someone who proclaims, "I don't crave the spotlight; I just crave the music," re-creating and performing in musicals might be his perfect calling. He may make a living as *Simply Barbra*, but there's no doubt that Steven Brinberg has more than Streisand in his future. ○

Editor's Note:

Steven will be at Don't Tell Mama in NYC on April 16, in symphony appearances with Marvin Hamlisch in Raleigh, North Carolina April 1 & 2 and in Seattle, Washington, June 8-12, and he'll be in the U.K. this summer. For a complete list of tour dates, visit www.simplybarbra.com.



Above (from top) The mirror has two faces Directorially speaking: what a cut-up—cut it out—Cut!