

Artist Biography: Jerry Herman

Jerry Herman (1931 -) is an icon of the American musical theater, the composer *and* lyricist of landmark shows such as *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame*, and *La Cage aux Folles*. A rightful heir to the towering figures of Broadway's Golden Age—Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin—Jerry (as he is known to everyone he meets) extended that era, almost single-handedly, through another generation, until the Great American Musical began its slow slide from mainstream to niche, when Broadway tunes ceased to be heard on the Hit Parade, and going to the theater became a special occasion, rather than a way of life.

Perhaps it is Jerry's innate optimism that propelled him through this shifting landscape; consider hits like "It's Today," "Before the Parade Passes By," "Open a New Window," and of course the great anthem "The Best of Times is Now ." The musical characters he created—Dolly Levi and Mame Dennis—set a new standard for larger-than-life leading ladies. Even his lesser known shows—*Milk and Honey*, *Mack & Mabel*, *Dear World*, *The Grand Tour*—are full of first-rate songs, and some (particularly *Mack & Mabel*) have achieved cult status.

But partly because of his broad appeal and huge commercial success, Jerry's work is frequently underrated by the critics, who often prize complexity over simplicity; elaborate musical architecture over hummable tunes; and dark irony over bright hopefulness. However, as many of the leading lights of Broadway are quick to point out, it's not easy to be simple. Jerry Herman is an exacting craftsman, whose words rhyme exactly and whose melodies seem to carry the words along effortlessly. He writes for story and character, and calls himself a "musical playwright". Yet he had little formal musical training and to this day, cannot read music and plays the piano (astonishingly well) by ear.

After a run of increasingly successful hits in the 1960s (*Milk & Honey*, *Hello, Dolly!*, and *Mame*), Jerry attempted to stretch himself in the 1970s, when rock & roll, British pop operas, and intellectually challenging cynicism were coming into fashion on Broadway. Jerry's efforts to break out of his own mold were rewarded with withering reviews and a string of ambitious flops: *Dear World*, *Mack & Mabel*, and *The Grand Tour*.

Then, in 1983 he returned to Broadway in triumph, with a show that was not only a critical and commercial smash, but an important social and cultural touchstone. *La Cage aux Folles*, with its wholesome depiction of two gay men and their family, broke taboos about portraying homosexuals on stage, and it produced what is probably Jerry's most potent song ever: "I Am What I Am," which not only became a gay anthem but spoke to the universal human desire for dignity and respect. It is all the more moving because shortly after *La Cage* opened, Jerry was diagnosed as HIV positive; but with experimental drug therapy and scientific breakthroughs in medicine, Jerry is, as one of his lyrics proclaims, "alive and well and thriving." However, he has never again written for the Broadway stage, preferring to leave at the top of his game—a decision which has left his many fans bereft.

The documentary film **Words and Music by Jerry Herman** is a definitive account of one of the great talents of the 20th century, the world he lived and worked in, and the legacy of joyous music he created.