LOOKING OVER HIS SHOULDER

By Louise Kerz Hirschfeld

It was a high-powered opening night at a landmark theatre in New York. The curtain hadn't gone up and yet already there was real drama underway – out in the crowded theatre lobby. I remember how anxious I was standing there with the opening night audience, all of us waiting for the same person. But he was late. Suddenly, he appeared and the crowded and the crowd parted. Someone excitedly shouted "Hirschfeld is here!" Then another ecstatic voice rang out: "Now the curtain can go up!"

I began to accompany my husband Al Hirschfeld to the theatre on a regular basis in 1995. Ever since, I've been assured of a good show put on by a consummate professional – on stage but always in the seat next to me and performed by Al Hirschfeld. In fact, during the stage performance, I become terribly interested in his reactions. I glance over and see a face completely entranced with the actors. There's a slight smile, but absolute attention is being paid to the stage. It's something akin to a state of reverence – Al's love affair with the theatres.

Since our marriage, I have had the unique experience of seeing a Hirschfeld drawing before it hits the newsstands, of being present during The Process, at the drawing board, and before the NINAs are hidden.

Before our marriage, however, I had already been a keen as well as professional observer of the art of Al Hirschfeld – albeit without the luxury of proximity. I was a theatre historian, and Al Hirschfeld is an essential, at times definitive, original resource in the History of the American Stage. Long before videocameras, it was Al doing the accurate recording of our greatest shows.

The first drawing of his I *really* studied was one commissioned by my first husband, Leo Kerz, for his Broadway production of Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in 1961. That's the one were Zero Mostel transformed into the title character – a snorting, pawing, giant wild pachyderm. He did it right on stage without benefit of special effects and terrorized his poor, shaking co-star Eli Wallach night after night, literally tossing him about the stage. But it was Al Hirschfeld's equally remarkable theatrical art that, fortunately, captured the moment – in all its ferocity and power and originality – for posterity.

The scene was naturally the highlight of the play and, since I worked on the production, I got to witness it at many performances. Knowing it as well as I did, I couldn't help marveling at the way Hirschfeld had encapsulated it in a line drawing, like some kind of visual shorthand, catching not only the look but the high drama of the moment. Hirschfeld's accuracy of theatrical

detail is by now legendary, but he also seems to have some mysterious knowledge of the playwright's intentions. Like a clairvoyant with a pen instead of a crystal ball.

After that dramatic start I always returned to Hirschfeld's work to assist me in my research for museum exhibitions and television programs. Because of his incredible attention to visual detail and near photographic eye, Hirschfeld's drawings provide a wealth of visual history not only of the theatre but of American cultural life. Since his art runs like connective tissue through the last eight decades, his drawings are sociologically as well as aesthetically indispensible. In fact, a Hirschfeld is often more revealing than a camera, because of the drawing's flair and fluidity of movement, an added dimension over mere photography or videography.

In 1974 I began my career as Theatrical Curator with an exhibition entitled "The theatre of Max Reinhardt," honoring the brilliant Austrian stage director. The show, critics agreed, was filled with intriguing memorabilia, including a chain-mail costume the actress Elizabeth Bergner sent me and which she'd worn for her role in Joan of Arc. There was also a red curtain tassel from The Deutches Theatre in Berlin that brought tears of remembrance to the eyes of European émigrés. But even here Hirschfeld was indispensable, because the great Reinhardt spent his diminished final years in America, never to attain the stature of theatre royalty he possessed in Europe. To research his Broadway productions of Thornton Wilder's *The Merchant of Yonkers* (which became *Hello, Dolly* in 1964) and Irwin Shaw's *Sons and Soldiers*, I again consulted the incomparable Mr. Hirschfeld. Stella Adler even lent me the Hirschfeld rendering of herself and Gregory Peck – fresh-faced in his first Broadway role! – in *Sons and Soldiers*.

Later, my exhibition at New York's Lincoln Center, "The DeMille Dynasty," celebrated one hundred years of creativity in one family. Agnes de Mille was a major force in American Dance, and championed ballet on Broadway. During the golden age of America's musicals, she choreographed *Oklahoma!*, *One Touch of Venus*, *Carousel*, and *Brigadoon*, among many equally-celebrated others. But who can a poor theatre historian turn to when she needs t see how a stage show was choreographed? Who notices such things on a stage during the high drama? Who else but Al Hirschfeld. His ability to capture movement in accurate detail is as great as his knack for catching personal likenesses. So I naturally tuned to Hirschfeld drawings of those de Mille shows to see how he viewed her contribution to the musical form. In his drawing of *Oklahoma!*, for example, the chorus of dancers was prominently centered, and I inadvertently "discovered" there the work of the distinguished costume designer Miles White. This was a true revelation to me. Looking at the Hirschfeld was like looking into a time machine. Every detail of the past came vibrantly alive again. You almost get the feeling that if you put the drawing under a microscope you could read the clothing labels.

Then, in my endeavors as research consultant for Smith-Hemion Productions, I constantly integrated Hirschfeld's images of the pioneers of television for the Television Academy Hall of Fame. People don't naturally think of Al Hirschfeld as a recorder of TV but he was there with his sketch pad right from the first harsh, blanched-out flickers. For instance, his Edward R. Murrow is a man of action, whose intensity with just a telephone in hand expresses the ideals he brought to the new world of broadcast journalism. Murrow's the man who finally confronted Senator Joe McCarthy on the CBS show *See It Now*. And people did see it then. And thanks to Al Hirschfeld *we* can see Television in its formative years now!

A Night At The Theatre With Al

Both Al and I feel that going to the theatre is still a formal occasion. In fact, Al always wears custom-made shirts with an ascot designed by Turnbull & Asher in London, while I wear a festive long dress. At the appointed hour, I pick up Al's 1987 blue Cadillac and have it purring and ready for our departure downtown to the theatre district. We leave home early so that Al can locate a parking space near the theatre. This is an art in itself, one which Al has been performing for almost as long as his illustrating but with less public notoriety.

We both love to travel downtown via Central Park Drive because there is so much activity to observe - runners, skaters, and bikers getting their exercise, children returning home, lovers strolling under the magnificent backdrop of the Manhattan skyline. No matter what the weather, it's a magical setting, and a good appetizer for the main course of drama to come. Once we pass Carnegie Hall, traffic gets heavy. I sit tight while Al maneuvers masterfully between honking buses, onrushing cabs, and unpredictable pedestrians. Al says that *driving relaxes him!*

Finally we reach the playhouse and Al always finds a parking space. Just as reliably, Hirschfeld fans are on hand requesting autographs. Al is great favorite with the press as well. Photographers and videographers lined up outside the theatre always want to capture his image. They plead with him to smile and say a few words. "Hey, Al!"…This way please!"…"C'mon, not so fast!" Al's so shy, however, that he makes his way quickly into the lobby.

Ensconced in our aisle seats, we both transform into avid readers of *Playbill*. We usually devour the whole issue before the curtain goes up. During intermission, we remain in our seats, and directly after the final applause, we exit the theatre. Sometimes we attend the opening night party. Preferably, we go alone to a more private dinner at Sardi's, The Algonquin, or a small French restaurant named Tous Va Bien on West 50th Street. "Tous va bien" means "All goes well" in French, but that hasn't been the case in the theatre earlier. Over dinner, Al and I analyze the play we've just seen, venting our opinions about the writing, the directing, the acting, and the design.

That it's back to the Caddy and back uptown.

While Al Is Sketching

While the first and second acts are underway, however, the sightseeing and socializing stops and Al becomes all business. This is true whether the show he's at is simple "run-through" or a gala opening night. I observe him as unobtrusively as I can, hoping not to break his focus as he feverishly draws the actors or some aspect of the stage design and costumes – for the *entire* time there's action occurring onstage. If it's there he sees it. Very often he uses his "personal shorthand" to describe shapes and textures. We rarely converse during this crucial time but my reward for my silence is a chance to look at the sketchbook when his work is complet4d. There, miraculously, are the leading characters and, invariably, the most dramatic moment and the musical highlight. Nothing gets past Al. This sketch work is, he says, "an evolving collage of the total experience," because he's constantly in touch with his silent partner – the author of the play. Remaining in his seat at intermission, Al appears to be relaxed, but he used that time to look over his sketches from the first act.

Am I Surprised By Al's Take On A Show

Sometimes I am surprised at a drawing, for instance in the recent, marvelous Lincoln Center Theatre production of *Twelfth Night*, directed by Nicholas Hytner. In his drawing, Al centered the three character actors, Philip Bosco, Max Wright, and Brian Murray, while the Oscar-winning "guest star", Helen Hunt, was only featured. Obviously, this was Al's individual "take" on the production. In Hirschfeld's work, you're seeing how he saw it, not how the prevailing winds of the time would like audiences to see it. It's one of the things that make Al's theatre drawings so valuable – their objectivity as well as their ingenuity. In this *Twelfth Night* drawing, for instance, Al also decided to capture the brilliant details of stage designer Bob Crowley's unusual watery environment. Twenty years from now, theatre historians are going to be much more fascinated and interested in that detail than that Helen Hunt won an Oscar. Al is not swayed by publicity.

Close Proximity To The Artist

In being so close to Al's work, I have more insight into the playwright's intentions, the actor's motivations, and the artist's process. Al really does notice everything on the stage – like that interesting Bob Crowley water. Al is a camera and always zooms in on the most interesting thing to draw. He has those incredible powers of concentration and approaches his art with the same time-frame as a daily journalist trying to make the morning edition.

Miraculously, he can receive phone calls, carry on conversations with *The New York Times*, and his daughter, or the Margo Feiden Gallery, have afternoon tea, and draw simultaneously. Let's see Woodward and Bernstein do that! Almost every drawing he does has a deadline, a rushed deadline, and Al will not leave his chair until a work is finished, like a captain on the ship bringing his ship into port. Very often, when an assignment is difficult, he can't fall asleep until the artistic problem is solved, or he *dreams* about various ways of designing his drawing. Now that's what I call a hard worker! Even his subconscious doesn't give him any time off. The next morning, holding onto that dream, he rises at first light and races to his drawing board to mot down all those nocturnal notions. In his youth, he was called "the flash" which still describes not only his working habits but how quickly he finds a parking space.

Now that I am a resident in Hirschfeld's landscape, certain misconceptions I had about his working methods have been eliminated. I never realized that he first creates a full pencil drawing complete with every detail including perspective lines. In fact, the *intent* of the drawing is fully realized - and simplified with pen and ink. The pencil lines are then erased leaving the magic of black line.

Reaction Of Subjects To Their Portraits

Looking at a Hirschfeld caricature of one's self is so intensely personal. Not only do the subjects want to recognize themselves, they want to know how Hirschfeld sees them…as if he has a special awareness of their interior, and perhaps a secret clue to some area of their personality. Very often he does. It's also a bit like taking a lie detector test then having the results printed in *The New York Times!* Fortunately, most subjects pass with flying colors – or, rather, flying black and white. I remember most vividly Carol Channing remarking that in a drawing of her in *Hello, Dolly*, Al made her thinner knowing that she wanted to lose a few pounds.

Hirschfeld's Artistic Sustenance

Al draws his artistic sustenance from Life and absorbs what he sees. It is a constant learning process. During a visit to Florence I climbed to the steeple of The Duomo while Al, in front of the Palace de Vecchio, under a statue of Michelangelo, was content to sit in the square observing the international visitors. Their costumes, gestures, movements…all fascinated him. And maybe that statue of Michelangelo was whispering comments in his ear by means of that mystical non-verbal communication great artists share.

Al, of course, is on familiar terms with most of the old masters, having studied them hard and long in his years in a Paris garret. It was there, too, that he became aware of the "modern movement" in the art of the early Twenties. That style has left a lasting impression on him.

Even now, despite his hectic work schedule, Al has his eye open to "high art." Usually, he saves his energy for evening activities and it is up to me, virulent museum-goer that I am, to bring back full reports of current exhibitions around town. However, when we are out of town, and away from the barber's chair, he will accompany me to the museum. Recently, we've visited exhibitions at the Getty Museum, the British Museum, and Musee d'Orsay. I'll never forget he exhilarated expression on Al's face when he came upon Tiepolo's *Paradise* at the Doge's Palace. The early Picasso at the National Gallery and Renoir at the Art Institute of Chicago were also of special interest to him. At the Renoir show, Al studied the hoof of a majestic horse for quite some time. We also regularly attend friend's exhibits. Al feels they're as important as theatre openings – too bad Al can't whip up sketches of them for the morning paper! Arbit Blatas, Paul Jenkins, Jack Levine, David Levine, George Segal, Ed Sorel, Bill Jacklin, Gloria Vanderbilt, David Rankin, and photographers Arnold Newman, Peter Basch, Roddy MacDowell, and Gordon Parks. Al Hirschfeld is never analytical or critical of fellow artists. He is supportive and enjoys seeing new as well as retrospective works.

Finishing Touches

I've learned one thin peering over that busy shoulder – Al Hirschfeld gives the same attention to every assignment. He is most democratic in that respect and makes no artistic compromises. He also always looks forward to the next challenge in pen and ink. Today, when he summons me up to his studio to peruse his current work and comment on some aspect of the drawing, I am completely honest. The knowledge of 36 years of admiration for that work is a solid enough foundation for me to say, "Darling, the chin, or that brow…"

I gave the following poem to Al on his 92nd birthday. Every word is true and describes him vividly today:

Conclusion at Walden

There was an artist…who was disposed to strive for perfection…his singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial Youth. As he made no compromise with time, Time kept out of his way, and sighed at a distance, because it could not overcome him.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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