

HELLO, GORGEOUS!

# FUNNY GIRL

STARRING GABI EPSTEIN AS FANNY BRICE



**AUDIENCE GUIDE**

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## ABOUT THE AUDIENCE GUIDE

This guide was compiled by Dana Kobernick for the Segal Centre for Performing Arts, with content by Caitlin Murphy, for the occasion of the Montreal premiere of *Funny Girl*.

This guide may be used solely for educational purposes.

To reserve tickets at a reduced rate, or for questions, comments, citations or references, please contact Patrick Lloyd Brennan:  
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## PRODUCTION CREDITS

### A SEGAL CENTRE PRODUCTION

MUSIC BY Jule Styne  
LYRICS BY Bob Merrill  
BOOK BY Isobel Lennart

FROM AN ORIGINAL STORY BY Miss Lennart  
PRODUCED FOR THE BROADWAY STAGE BY Ray Stark  
NEW YORK PRODUCTION SUPERVISED BY Jerome Robbins  
ORIGINAL PRODUCTION DIRECTED BY Garson Kanin

### DIRECTED BY PETER HINTON

### CAST

FANNY BRICE Gabi Epstein  
  
MRS. BRICE Corrine Koslo  
NICKY ARNSTEIN John Ulyatt  
FLORENCE ZIEGFELD Lorne Kennedy  
EDDY RYAN Kyle Golemba  
  
ENSEMBLE Eric Abel, Chris Barillaro, Jenni Burke,  
Michael Challenger, Nicko Giannakos,  
Alexia Gourd, Will Lamond, Danette MacKay,  
Adele Mackenzie, George Masswohl,  
Kathleen McAuliffe, Felicia Shulman,  
Amanda Struthmann

### CREATIVE TEAM

MUSICAL DIRECTION Allen Cole  
ASSISTANT MUSICAL DIRECTOR Nick Burgess  
CHOREOGRAPHY Dayna Tekatch  
  
SET & COSTUME DESIGN Michael Gianfrancesco  
CREATIVE ASSISTANT Alyssa Westman  
LIGHTING DESIGN Bonnie Beecher  
SOUND Peter Balov  
  
STAGE MANAGER Luciana Burcheri  
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER Merissa Tordjman  
APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER Alexandra Dubreuil-Gagnon  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Jon Lachlan Stewart

## SYNOPSIS

Star of the stage, Fanny Brice sits in her dressing room, backstage of the New Amsterdam theatre, contemplating the bumpy road that led her to Follies fame. It's an ominous night: her husband the beautiful bad-boy, Nick Arnstein is being released from prison, and their future together is unclear. Memories and music flood Fanny's dressing room, as scenes from her past are magically brought back to life.

With humble roots on the Lower East Side, Fanny is regularly teased for her outsized stage ambitions and her less-than-stellar looks. Insisting she's "a bagel on a plate full of onion rolls" Fanny decides that if you can't fit in the chorus line, you have to stridently step out of it. She starts making a name for herself as a powerful songstress and clever comedienne and eventually gets tapped for the biggest show in town, the Ziegfeld Follies.

After finally gaining the fame and acclaim she so desperately sought, Fanny realizes "you can't take an audience home with you" and goes after love and marriage in the arms of a betting man, Nick Arnstein. But when she discovers that her husband's dealings may be shadier than she thought, Fanny has to decide how much she's willing to risk for love.

## FUNNY GIRL

### ABOUT FANNY BRICE

*Funny Girl* is a largely fictional adaptation of the life of Fanny Brice, a popular American singer and comedian who was long associated with the Ziegfeld Follies. Born Fannie Borach on October 29, 1891, in New York City, Fanny Brice made her stage debut at Keeney's Theatre. At the age of 13, she won the venue's amateur night and soon thereafter left school to pursue a career in the music industry. After several failed attempts at living out her dream, Brice began working at a burlesque house. While working as a burlesque performer, Brice was discovered by producer Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. who brought her aboard for his 1910 production, Follies. She was hired again in 1921 and performed in them into the 1930s.

From the 1930s until her death in 1951, Fanny had a radio presence as a bratty toddler named Snooks, a role she premiered in a Follies skit co-written by playwright Moss Hart. Baby Snooks premiered in The Ziegfeld Follies on Air in February 1936 on CBS.

Brice had a short-lived marriage in her teens to a local barber, Frank White. Her second husband was professional gambler Julius W. "Nicky" Arnstein, with whom she had two children. Brice divorced him on September 17, 1927. She went on to marry songwriter and stage producer Billy Rose. Their marriage also failed.

Fanny Brice suffered a stroke on May 24, 1951, and died less than a week later in Los Angeles, California. She was 59 years old.(i)(ii)

(i) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny\\_Brice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny_Brice)

(ii) <http://www.biography.com/people/fanny-brice-9225840>

## FUNNY FACTS

### **FUNNY GIRL DEBUNKED: FANNY BRICE FACTS**

Although *Funny Girl* is inspired by the life of singer-actress Fanny Brice, the plot is mostly fiction with an occasional fact thrown in. Both the play and movie were produced by Fanny Brice's son-in-law, Ray Stark, who had the unenviable task of appeasing Fanny's surviving family and associates, including Nick Arnstein. With Nick only too eager to initiate a lawsuit, Stark had to reshape history. And as Nick's character was fictionalized, other aspects of the story had to change too.

- Fanny's parents owned a chain of profitable saloons in New Jersey. They raised their family in comfort, with household servants and trips to Europe. While Fanny struggled towards fame, her family lived in a series of handsome apartments and townhouses – nothing like the lower class Henry Street life seen in the musical.
- Fanny made her amateur debut as a solo singer at Frank Keeney's popular Brooklyn Vaudeville Theatre. She was never part of the chorus, on roller skates or otherwise.
- Fanny was fired from a chorus by Broadway legend George M. Cohan. He dropped Brice from the Broadway cast of *Talk of the Town* because she could not dance.
- *Funny Girl* makes no mention of Fanny's friendship with Irving Berlin. His *Sadie Salome Go Home* helped Fanny break into the big-time.
- While it is true that Fanny performed material her own way, the pregnant bride number depicted in *Funny Girl* never happened. If it had, Florenz Ziegfeld would have fired her on the spot, no matter how much the audience laughed.
- Fanny first met Nick in Baltimore while on tour in the Shubert Brothers' 1912 revue *Whirl of Society*.
- Nick tagged along with the *Whirl of Society* tour, returned to New York with Fanny, and immediately moved in with her and her mother. He also began spending Fanny's money. Mrs. Borach saw through Arnstein's charms and distrusted him from day one.
- Fanny had Nick investigated and learned he was still married to his first wife. She had to wait seven years for his divorce to come through, and married him in 1919, just two months before the birth of their daughter Frances.

- Nick and Fanny did sail to England on *The Homeric*, but he didn't win any jackpots on the voyage. Instead, he shamelessly lived it up while Fanny supported him.
- Nick and Fanny had a daughter named Frances and a son named William who became a respected artist and college professor. By mutual agreement, William was not mentioned in *Funny Girl*.
- Fanny owned a Manhattan townhouse on West 76th Street and a large country place in Huntington, Long Island. Her money paid for both, so Arnstein's financial losses never changed their living arrangements. (i)

(i) John Kenrick, [www.musicals101.com/brice.htm](http://www.musicals101.com/brice.htm)

## ON BROADWAY

### FUNNY GIRL AND BARBRA STREISAND



(i) Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice

Barbra Streisand's performance as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* in the 1964 Broadway production was met with critical acclaim. The show introduced two of her signature songs, *People* and *Don't Rain on My Parade*. Because of the play's overnight success, she appeared on the cover of Time Magazine. In 1964 Streisand was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical but lost to Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!* In 1966, she repeated her success with *Funny Girl* in London's West End at the Prince of Wales Theatre. Although she had not made any films, Streisand was producer Ray Stark's first and only choice to portray Brice in the 1968 film version. "Hello, Gorgeous" are the first words uttered by Streisand in the film, the same comments made by Streisand when handed the Oscar statuette. (ii)(iii)

## IN HISTORY

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE LOWER EAST SIDE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

One of the oldest neighborhoods of the city, the Lower East Side has long been a lower-class worker neighborhood and often a poor and ethnically diverse section of New York. As well as Irish, Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, and other ethnic groups, it once had a sizeable German population.

The Lower East Side is perhaps best known as having once been a centre of Jewish culture. In her 2000 book *Lower East Side memories: A Jewish Place in America*, Hasia Diner explains that the Lower East Side is especially remembered as a place of Jewish beginnings in contemporary, impoverished Ashkenazi American Jewish culture. Vestiges of the area's Jewish heritage exist in shops on Hester Street and Essex Street, and on Grand Street near Allen. There is still an Orthodox Jewish community with Yeshiva day schools and a mikvah. A few Judaica shops can be found along Essex Street and a few Jewish scribes and variety stores. Some kosher delis and bakeries as well as a few "kosher style" delis, including the famous Katz's Deli, are located in the neighborhood.

### FLORENZ ZIEGFELD AND THE ZIEGFELD FOLLIES

The Ziegfeld Follies were a series of lavish theatrical productions on Broadway from 1907 through 1931, with renewals in 1934 and 1936. They became a radio program in 1932 and 1936 as *The Ziegfeld Follies of the Air*. Inspired by the *Folies Bergère* of Paris, the Ziegfeld Follies were conceived and mounted by Florenz Ziegfeld.

Dayna Tekatch, choreographer for the Segal Centre's production of *Funny Girl*, says that this musical is an exciting professional challenge for her: "The Ziegfeld Follies typically had upwards of 50 dancers and were performed on a large elaborate set. With fewer dancers and a smaller space, I need to rely on the skill sets of the dancers and my own creativity to produce something that is just as spectacular and jaw-dropping." (iv)

Second Avenue on the Lower East Side was the home to many Yiddish theatre productions in the Yiddish Theatre District during the early part of the 20th century, and Second Avenue came to be known as 'Yiddish Broadway', though most of the theatres are gone. Songwriter Irving Berlin, actor John Garfield, and singer Eddie Cantor grew up here. More recently, it has been settled by immigrants, primarily from Latin America. (v)

### THE REAL NICK ARNSTEIN

Julius Wilford "Nick" Arnstein was an American professional gambler and con artist. He gambled on transatlantic liners and

- (i) <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/hello-gorgeous-funny-girl-directed-by-sher-to-make-broadway-return-169078>
- (ii) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbra\\_Streisand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbra_Streisand)
- (iii) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funny\\_Girl\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funny_Girl_(film))
- (iv) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziegfeld\\_Follies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziegfeld_Follies)
- (v) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower\\_East\\_Side](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_East_Side)

## IN HISTORY (Cont)



(i) Fanny Brice ex-husband, Arnold Rothstein

in European casinos, and eventually fell in with Arnold Rothstein, a loan shark, who was best known for fixing the 1919 World Series.

*Funny Girl* suggests Nick's big "mistake" was selling phony bonds. In fact, he was part of a gang that deliberately stole five million dollars worth of Wall Street securities. Instead of gallantly turning himself in as depicted in the film, he stayed in hiding for four months, leaving Fanny to face intense press and police harassment while giving birth to their son William.

A federal court threw Nick into Leavenworth for 14 months, where Fanny used her influence to arrange for special treatment (including meals cooked by the warden's wife).

Nick and Fanny divorced in 1927 after she discovered that he was having an affair with an older, wealthier woman. Though Nick attempted a reconciliation with Fanny in the late 1940s, she chose not to become involved with him again. (ii)(iii)

(i) from <http://www.wbez.org/blogs/john-r-schmidt/2012-09/fanny-dumps-her-man-102260>

(ii) John Kenrick, [www.musicals101.com/brice.htm](http://www.musicals101.com/brice.htm)

(iii) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky\\_Arnstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky_Arnstein)

(iv) <http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/113151/Jule-Styne/biography>

(v) <http://www.thebobmerrill.com>

(vi) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funny\\_Girl\\_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funny_Girl_(musical))

## MUSIC

### THE MUSIC OF FUNNY GIRL

The musical geniuses behind the songs of *Funny Girl* were Jule Styne, composer, and Bob Merrill, lyricist.

A renowned composer for Broadway, films, television, and radio, Jule Styne penned the music for some of America's best-loved and most enduring songs. A prodigy who had received classical training since early childhood, by age eight Styne was a gifted concert pianist and occasional soloist with the Chicago Symphony. One of the most prolific songwriter/composers in American theatre, Styne specialized in creating songs especially suited for particular Broadway divas like Carol Channing and Barbra Streisand.

For much of the 1950s, Bob Merrill was one of the most successful songwriters, with a string of novelty hits. Longing to write more profound songs, Bob turned his efforts toward the musical theatre. By the late fifties, he had written music and lyrics for Broadway's *New Girl In Town*, followed by *Take Me Along*, *Carnival*, *Henry*, *Sweet Henry* and eventually *Funny Girl*.

(iv)(v)

### FUNNY GIRL ON BROADWAY: FUN FACTS

- The musical was produced by Ray Stark who was Brice's son-in-law via his marriage to her daughter Frances.
- Early considerations for the role of Fanny Brice included Mary Martin, Anne Bancroft, Eydie Gormé and Carol Burnett.
- Director Garson Kanin suggested *People* be cut from the score because it didn't fit the character. Streisand already had recorded the song for a single release and Kanin agreed to keep it based on the audience reaction to it.
- After seventeen previews, the Broadway production opened on March 26, 1964, at the Winter Garden Theatre, subsequently transferring to the Majestic Theatre and The Broadway Theatre. Later in the run, Streisand was replaced by Mimi Hines. It closed on July 1, 1967 to complete its total run of 1,348 performances.
- The production was nominated for eight Tony Awards but, facing tough competition from *Hello, Dolly!*, it failed to win in any categories.
- The original cast recording of *Funny Girl* was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2004. (vi)

## VARIATIONS

### THE SHOW VS. THE MOVIE

Fans of the 1968 film *Funny Girl* may be surprised to see many differences in the stage version. In the movie, several songs, scenes and characters were changed or added. In the 1985 book *Barbra Streisand: The Woman, the Myth, the Music* by Shaun Considine, composer Jule Styne revealed he was unhappy with the orchestrations for the film. "They were going for pop arrangements," he recalled. "They dropped eight songs from the Broadway show and we were asked to write some new ones. They didn't want to go with success. It was the old-fashioned MGM Hollywood way of doing a musical. They always change things to their way of vision, and they always do it wrong. But, of all my musicals they screwed up, *Funny Girl* came out the best." (i)(ii)

(i) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jule\\_Styne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jule_Styne)  
(ii) [http://barbra-archives.com/live/60s/funny\\_girl\\_broadway\\_3.html](http://barbra-archives.com/live/60s/funny_girl_broadway_3.html)

## AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS

### TONY AWARDS

Best Musical  
Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical  
Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical  
Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical  
Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical  
Best Choreography  
Best Composer and Lyricist  
Best Producer of a Musical

### ACADEMY AWARDS

Best Picture  
Best Actress  
Best Actress in a Supporting Role  
Best Cinematography  
Best Film Editing  
Best Scoring of a Musical Picture  
Best Original Song for the title song  
Best Sound

(nominated)  
Sydney Chaplin (nominated)  
Barbra Streisand (nominated)  
Danny Meehan (nominated)  
Kay Medford (nominated)  
Carol Haney (nominated)  
Jule Styne & Bob Merrill (nominated)  
Ray Stark (nominated)  
  
(nominated)  
Barbra Streisand (winner)  
Kay Medford (nominated)  
Harry Stradling (nominated)  
William Sands & Maury Winetrobe (nominated)  
Walter Scharf (nominated)  
Jule Styne & Bob Merrill (nominated)  
(nominated)

### A BEHIND THE SCENES LOOK AT THE MAKING OF *FUNNY GIRL*

INTERVIEW WITH PETER HINTON  
by Caitlin Murphy, DRAMATURG-IN-RESIDENCE

**I've heard you describe *Funny Girl* as a dream project. Why is it so special to you?**

It made a huge impact on me as a young person, because it plays with an experience of performance and of love as being at odds. And there are two things in my life I have tried to pursue and that is my creative life and my love life. And they have always been at odds! So it speaks to me on that level, the emotional level, but it's also this incredible score of Jule Styne that is inherently dramatic, it's inherently psychological; it takes the terrain of the private life and puts it into the public sphere. And I think everybody can identify with Fanny Brice who lives out her life on the stage both defying her own tragedy in a huge gesture of survival... but creating such a wilful exterior that we don't think she suffers, we don't see her as vulnerable... So to me it's really a piece where the personal is political and the political does become personal... It's iconic in that regard. And what we love about Fanny in this show is that she doesn't sit down and lick her wounds in the corner or crawl inside her shell. She lives her life defiantly and bravely and full of foibles... and it has costs, it has consequence. I like that mix in the genre too where it's a big, sprawling entertaining musical, but it's also really about the struggles of being alone in the world and [how] standing out from the crowd comes with cost.

**What spoke to you so much about the photograph of Fanny Brice that dominates the set design?**

Well, it reminds us that the title of this musical is ironic. That we develop a persona to cope in life, and for Fanny it was being funny. Edward Steichen took this photograph that captured what was so sad in her. And so many comics have really tragic circumstances out of which they come, which tells us something about comedy too. Comedy speaks to the hardship of life... Most jokes played at slow speed are actually really sad. And so there's a great irony and pathos in [the photograph]. Behind the smile of Fanny Brice, behind the schtick, and the comedy is a human being; there's something vulnerable, there's something tragic inside of her. And so that fine line between tragedy and comedy is very blurry... it's very frail.

**Much of *Funny Girl* is set in the theatre. What's the theatre like as place to be?**

Well, it's an incredible place because we get to imagine on how the world is. We both get to reflect the world as we experience it and see it, but also offer ideas about how it might be better. We idealize it as much as we reflect it. A lot of people think about the theatre as a place where you escape, and it has elements of that and that's what's elusive about it, but it's also a place where we encounter things. We go to the theatre to see the life we live more clearly, to see it in a deeper or sharper perspective. And Fanny does that her whole life.

What's so incredible about this time – it's set between 1910 and 1923 – is Fanny Brice brought a whole Jewish cultural tradition to the stage; she popularized something, which some people say brought with it costs, that trivialized it or stereotyped it, but she also really was representative of a very significant voice and important culture. Without our culture, without our theatre, we don't have that way to imagine about our experience. We just see the facts of it. And so the play invites us to imagine a reality in a fresh way, in a new way. Why we come to the theatre is to see life through a different lens, and that's what Fanny does in her own work. Whether it's a comic bit or whether it's a very serious song; she's trying to bring her experience of her life to the stage.

What do you think it would have been like to be in the audience for a performance of the Ziegfeld Follies?

It must have been absolutely incredible! I mean, we have to remember that this was a time too when there is no television, there is no internet... We live in an age where we're constantly entertained, and we expect to be entertained 24 hours a day. Where the Ziegfeld Follies was this incredible idealized spectacle of the American Dream, of beauty... And prior to that it was a very select few who could see this kind of pageantry, this kind of sophistication, and it was truly an American art form in that regard. I mean, [Florenz Ziegfeld] took the follies from the Follies Bergere and the European tradition, but I think it brought an incredible sense of glamour and myth to people's lives. And people need mythology. And New York is the centre of American mythology.

**What are some of your favourite musicals?**

Oh my god. I have a lot of them! But this period is one that's very dear to me. After the Second World War there's a whole genre of musicals set in historical settings that have very strong women characters. *Gypsy*, *Hello Dolly*, *Mame*, *Unsinkable Molly Brown*, *Funny Girl*, *Cabaret*... [featuring] these outcast kind of women who aren't your typical ingenues. They stand out from the crowd, they're iconoclastic and they're strong and they're funny and they laugh tragedy in the face. There's something really audacious in the spirit of that. And they

## THE CREATIVE PROCESS (Cont)

use intelligence, wit, and sexuality to take on the world. And they're all equally plays as they are musicals. So there's a really muscular vitality to that period. So *Gypsy* and *Cabaret* I just think are extraordinary pieces, and [*Funny Girl*] to me is really one of the jewels in the crown of this period of the American musical.

**What do you think of Fanny Brice as a comic? It seems like a lot of her humour was about pointing out how stupid it is to be beautiful!**

I mean that's what's so amazing about her: her jokes aren't about how unattractive she is, but how the ideal of beauty is so unattainable and worth mocking. So in that sense she's quite radical because she challenges every sort of waspy patriarchal hierarchical role model and puts the voice of the common person, the common Jewish person, the common Jewish woman, as the standard or the measure, or the viewpoint... She was so original to be really the first American female comic. It's not like there were tons of women before her and she was following in anybody's footsteps. She was inventing the role model. You think about someone like Joan Rivers, who we think of as a pioneer in that field... she's 50 years after Fanny Brice. And to me comedy is always political... it challenges what is held sacred by a society. And I think there's a really long overdue feminist analysis of Fanny Brice and that role she plays. Women comics are always very interesting in that regard for challenging ideas about beauty and femininity and women in power.

**Do you think a focus on performance can be dangerous to our sense of identity?**

Yeah. It can destroy us. We live in an age of reality television, of selfies... we're constantly performing our own experience. We have a much more literate performance vocabulary. If you watch old game shows from the 50's, what's really beautiful in them is you see people who don't know how to behave on camera. You don't see that at all anymore. Because we're so literate, we're so conscious.

And we can do photo shoots with ourselves on our phones and stuff... and so it creates the illusion of experience rather than the reality of it. And when you live your life on stage, you can start to believe the character that you are; you start doing things for a reaction, rather than an experience. It's a strange kind of phenomenon.

There's a famous story about Peggy Lee, the jazz singer, on her way to a concert at the Russian tea room. And she's in her scarf and sunglasses and no make up and someone stops her

on the street and says "Aren't you Peggy Lee?" and she says, "Not yet." There's something in that about Fanny Brice's story too: how does she construct who she is?

And in the show we get to see Fanny on stage, we get to see her off stage, we get to see her rehearsing to be onstage. And what's interesting as we work through it is that sometimes when she's onstage, she's completely real, and sometimes when she's offstage in life, she's totally acting. Because to socialize with people, to deal with a complicated and difficult life, we have to act. Everybody knows what it is to put on a brave front... we're very articulate about that. So that's why I think this show really speaks to us: we understand its language.

**What's it like directing plays that have famous films associated to them?**

It's really hard when you do anything that the audience already has a picture of, and so I try to not to simply replicate that. But you have to be conscientious. I just directed *Pygmalion*, and people have an expectation of what Eliza Doolittle is, and here [with *Funny Girl*] one of the big images in our head is Barbra Streisand, is that film. There's a wonderful delight in having this double image in your head.

I do it when we're rehearsing... I'll have in my head, "Oh, that's what Barbra Streisand did," while I'm seeing something else. And there are many ways to interpret Fanny Brice. That's the interesting thing. It's why when the audience comes in, they'll see in the set a very different representation of her; I want to remind them of the real Fanny Brice... But bringing those kind of icons [to the stage], we have to understand, they're powerful for a reason. [I want] to allow them to be in the audience's imagination but I don't want to be a slave to them.

I'm doing *Alice in Wonderland*, which has got the worse curse in the world: Disney! Like our Alice doesn't have blonde hair, for example, and that's a wild thing for some people! They're just not accustomed to that.

**Do you worry at all about disappointing people who have the movie in mind?**

No. I'm confident in our own vision of it. What I hope is that people go, "Oh, I never saw that story that way." Because it just appears on the surface like a very high-strung romantic melodrama, and on one level it is that. But it's one with really strong psychological underpinnings. We identify with Fanny because she's not beautiful, because she's not perfect, because she doesn't get everything. She humanizes a heroic position. And you can project yourself onto her very easily.

## THE CREATIVE PROCESS (Cont)

INTERVIEW WITH GABI EPSTEIN

By Dana Kobernick

*GABI EPSTEIN TALKS ABOUT PLAYING THE ROLE OF FANNY BRICE, THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS, AND WHAT ATTRACTED HER TO THE PART.*

**You are stepping into a role made iconic by the legendary Barbra Streisand. How have you prepared and how will you make it your own?**

My very first professional gig was a one-woman show about Fanny Brice and I got the opportunity to dive into her life and become fully acquainted with her. It is true that we associate Barbra Streisand with this role, because she had such an influence on the creation of the show and the character, that *Funny Girl* became as much the Barbra Streisand story as it was the Fanny Brice story. While bringing myself into the role, I will use these two women as influences and allow them to guide me. Fanny Brice was extremely expressive, she was Vaudeville in every sense of the word. Streisand is more modern and self-deprecating and uses Jewish humour. So I will use my own skills, but also draw upon each of these styles to present a cohesive character.

**What is the biggest challenge of taking on this role?**

Technically speaking, the stamina required for this role is very challenging because there are so many musical numbers. Add to that, a million costume changes! I have to make sure that I get enough rest and do my vocal warm-ups. Beyond that, for me staying in shape is helpful to maintaining my energy, so I run and do yoga.

Another challenging element, is that although the show is called *Funny Girl*, it is not a particularly a funny show, other than the Follies numbers. The title is ironic. It has that tragic clown aspect to it. Fanny Brice had a difficult life with many obstacles, so I need to make sure that she doesn't become a caricature and that the audience sees the many layers of who she was and what she was living.

**What is your attraction to playing a role in a musical versus a play?**

I am a classically trained soprano and I love performing as a singer. There is something thrilling for me when, in a musical, the emotional stakes get so high that the only thing left to do is sing. That said, I remember Liza Minnelli once saying that she is always an actor first. When she is in a musical, she is acting through song. When she dances, she is acting through movement. When she is in a play, she is acting through spoken text. And that changed the way I thought about performing

songs. Musicals are attractive to me just because I love to sing so much, but first and foremost I am an actor. Whether it is a musical or a play, as long as I am experiencing the emotional journey, they are both fulfilling.

**What is your favourite line from *Funny Girl*, either in dialogue or song?**

One of my favourite lines is when Fanny says, "I'm a bagel on a plate full of onion rolls." That is a typical Fanny Brice line and something that I have often felt growing up, as a person who loves to sing, act and dance, in a world of people who don't necessarily do that all the time.

Another favourite line is said during the scene right before "People". It is a beautiful scene where Fanny and Nick are talking about how different their lives are, with him exploring the world and she living on Henry Street. They both say that they get lonely and each is surprised that the other feels that way. Fanny says, "Who would think -- to look at us -- that we would have the same problem!" It's a special moment.

**As a Jewish performer, do you have a particular affinity to Fanny Brice?**

I really do. When I was graduating from school, I contemplated using my middle name as my stage name instead of Epstein, which is a typical Jewish last name. But then I realized, that my being Jewish is part of whom I am, much like it was for Fanny Brice and is for Barbra Streisand. For me, Judaism is more cultural than religious, and embracing it has helped me over the years. I am not afraid of being who I am. I can put myself out there and be funny and self-deprecating in a Gabi-esque way, that is hopefully charming to other people. In my cabaret show, I refer to myself as the "Jewess Beltress" because that is who I am. It's part of my identity.

**What is the funniest thing that has ever happened to you on stage?**

I am pretty good about not "corpsing" [break character by laughing] on stage because I know that if I start then I'm finished, and there is no way of getting back on track. So if something funny happens, I just try to keep it going. That being said, of course sometimes things do go awry. I once performed in a musical revue called *To Life*. I was dancing with a partner and during one number, he and I both twirled at the same time and I completely stepped out of my shoe. So there I was on one side of him, with my shoe on his other side. He created this Cinderella-like routine where he was holding my shoe to his heart and I was reaching out for it. And then he placed it on my foot with a grandiose ending. We both just went with it and it was the greatest thing ever.

## AUDITIONING FOR A MUSICAL

For professional artists, an audition is usually the culmination of years of training and honing their skills. It is the ultimate job interview that takes lots of preparation. Actors must familiarize themselves with the script, from which they will be asked to read an excerpt, or to present a monologue of their choice. In the case of a musical, they will also have to perform a song that is in the same style as the show for which they are auditioning. There's no point in heading into an audition for the classic *South Pacific* and belting out a musical number from *Avenue Q!*

But a brilliant audition is only part of the process. The panel, made up of the company's artistic director, the casting director, the director, musical director and choreographer, will want to see if performers can take direction, if they fit in with the collaborative nature of theatre and, quite simply, if they are the right type for the role.

There are generally two types of auditions:

- Open calls are for anyone who would like to audition and are usually used to cast the ensemble roles.

- Invited auditions for particular roles, where casting directors submit the character breakdowns to agents who, in turn, make recommendations. The creative team then makes their choices from these recommendations and auditions the actors one at a time.

In rare cases, an actor may be offered a part without auditioning, usually if he or she is established within the industry, if it is for a very particular role or if there is name recognition.

Lisa Rubin, Artistic and Executive Director of the Segal Centre for Performing Arts, had this to share about the *Funny Girl* casting process: "We started our search for Fanny Brice over a year and a half ago because we knew that we needed a very strong female lead. Fanny was the first role cast with Gabi Epstein. We had two open calls, one in Montreal and one in Toronto, for the ensemble dancers, who often play multiple roles in the show and are real triple threats. And we worked with agents for the other roles. The result is an A list group of brilliant performers."

## BUILDING THE SET

During their search through artifacts and artwork from the time period of *Funny Girl*, Michael Gianfrancesco, set designer, said that he and the show's director, Peter Hinton, were inspired by a photograph they found of Fanny Brice from the early 1920s. The somber photograph essentially influenced the entire set design. "Our set design celebrates the dynamics of the Segal Centre stage and is tailored to its non-traditional space," Michael said. "The photograph of Fanny Brice serves as the backdrop. From there, our ideas emanated from the concept of a backstage theatre dressing room and all elements that make up that kind of space." Audience members are sure to be delighted by a lavish number that honours the elaborate Ziegfeld Follies productions.

## ABOUT THE SEGAL CENTRE FOR PERFORMING ARTS

The Segal Centre for Performing Arts is a not-for-profit theatre company dedicated to nurturing, producing and presenting world-class English-language theatre, and to showcasing the best professional artists from Montreal and beyond.

Founded in 1967, the Segal Centre has expanded to become a nationally recognized venue for the performing arts, a training ground for emerging artists and a one-of-a-kind destination for the best of jazz concerts and Jewish arts and culture.

The Segal Centre is committed to strengthening our communities and developing the artists and audiences of tomorrow through the transformative power of the performing arts.

## THEATRE ETIQUETTE – SEGAL

Please take a moment to go over the standards of theatre etiquette with your students before they come to the theatre.

1. *Funny Girl* will be performed in the main theatre of the Segal Centre. Performances at the Segal are for both groups and the general public. It is important that everyone be attentive (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance, so that others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Please do not unwrap candy, play with zippers, or play with your programme.
2. Do not put your feet on the back of the seat in front of you and please do not climb over seats.
3. If you plan to take notes on the play for the purpose of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the performance. Seeing you do this can be distracting for the actors. Please wait until intermission or after the performance is finished to write your reflections.
4. Absolutely no photos or video may be taken without the express consent of management.

5. Use of cell phones, iPods, tablets, or other self-illuminating electronics is strictly prohibited in the theatre. The light from these devices is visible from the stage and in the audience. It is extremely distracting to the artists on stage and inconsiderate to your fellow audience members. Composing or reading text messages is forbidden.

6. Your seat is only guaranteed until the moment the theatre doors close. Late entry is very disruptive; if a patron is tardy we ask that they please follow the instructions of our front-of-house staff.

7. ENJOY THE SHOW!

## IN THE CLASSROOM

### THEMES

- A story about love, loss and survival.
- An ironic depiction of the sad clown, who rises to stardom and is ultimately destroyed by the American Marketing Machine and the man she loves.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- By the end of *Funny Girl*, do you think that Fanny Brice has asserted her independence and achieved success?
- Discuss the ways in which music and lyrics can elevate a performance.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Compare and contrast the film and stage versions of *Funny Girl*. Which did you prefer and why?
- Write a review of *Funny Girl*, including the performances, the technical components and your overall experience.
- Design your own sets and costumes for *Funny Girl*. Explain your choices.

### SUGGESTED RESEARCH TOPICS AND LINKS

- Research New York's Lower East Side in the early 20th century. Do you think that *Funny Girl* captured the historical context?