

On *not* being manly

Stephen Maddison analyses the Barbra Streisand phenomenon and the star as a gay icon

BARBRA Streisand: middle of the road big-nosed bolshy ball-breaking ego-maniac; or divine proto-postfeminist, living legend and original twenty-four carat superstar?

Having turned fifty this year (April 24th), La Babs has now been peerless for thirty years. The position that she holds in our culture is unique. No other Star has sold as many gold discs, *period* (forget Jackson, Dire Straits, Elvis and the Beatles), and can genuinely claim to be as successful in the nineties as she was when she started out in the sixties (no need for any tediously predictable comeback for her: she never went away). She's a singer (seventeen platinum albums, four of them quadruple platinum, total sales topping 250 million), an actress (with an Oscar for her very first role), songwriter (with another Oscar for her song 'Evergreen'), producer, director and screenwriter. Her fortysecond album (*The Broadway Album* in 1985), released twenty-five years after her first, became her second biggest selling of all. As she's got older instead of doing less demanding movie work and languishing in some kind of aristocratic after-life of stardom (à la Taylor, Fonda), she's taken on yet more creative responsibilities: *Yentl*, her thirteenth feature film, was the first movie ever to be produced, directed, co-written and starred in by the same person.

Her love-life has been no less significant (especially to queers – note the hunkettes): married to Elliot Gould, romantically associated with Omar Sharif, Ryan O'Neal, Pierre Trudeau (Canadian Prime Minister at the time), Jon Peters (who became a movie mogul on the back of Barbra's projects – he was a hairdresser when she met him), Richard Baskin, Don Johnson (who had the cheek to dump Barbra: let not a soul mention the name 'Melanie Griffith' in my presence), Steven Spielberg, Richard Gere, James Newton Howard and Liam Neeson.

Yet part of her appeal to me (and I'm sure billions of other gay men) is that despite this litany of success and

enough talent to blast several lesser superstars (and let's face it: they're *all* lesser) into the ether of non-descriptness, she has had to fight every inch of the way to get her projects off the ground, and gets little official recognition upon their completion, especially in Hollywood. Her superb *Broadway Album*, which became number one all over the world, and four times platinum in the States, nearly didn't get made at all because CBS records wouldn't countenance its production. Her recent film *The Prince of Tides*, which she directed and co-produced, as well as starring in, was turned down by every major studio and finally okayed by Jon Peters (ex beau) whilst he was at Columbia (she was obviously calling in old favours . . .) It earned Nick Nolte a best actor Oscar nomination, and got a best film nomination (neither of which bore fruit), yet Barbra was not even nominated as best director. This is not a convenient oversight, but a blatant snub by the Academy. If the film had been perceived as no good (fools! fools!) then there could have been some justification for overlooking her (but not much . . .), yet they obviously thought it was exceptional enough to be considered as one of the year's best films. Surely the brilliance of an acting performance and a film's greatness is due, for the most part, to the quality of the direction?

Understated

Why wasn't she recognised by the Academy?

The fact of the matter is that the world of big bucks showbusiness doesn't appreciate Ms Streisand. Not one bit. She's too loud, she's too talented. She makes films about child abuse with subtle, understated love scenes when the trend is for macho meathead movies. She

makes albums of show tunes when everybody else is making rock albums, she won't do what she's told, she won't do it somebody else's way. She embraces her Jewish background in a world dominated by passing movie moguls eager to shirk off their cultural backgrounds. She's a woman in a world of pin-striped heart-attack fodder with several volumes worth of unsavoury Freudian insecurities between them. As one hysterically threat-

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Barbra Streisand in *The Prince of Tides*: 'At the risk of sounding exruciatingly banal, she reassures me that you don't have to be vigorously manly in order to say what you want to say . . .'

ened MGM mogul once said: 'She's a man-eater. A regular ball-breaker. She wants to control the picture; she wants her own hairdresser, her own wardrobe, her own director — she wants it all.' (And people wonder why she's such a gay male icon . . .?)

Awareness

Yentl, *Nuts* (which she produced) and *The Prince of Tides* are films that sit awkwardly outside the frame of subject-matter that is comfortable for your average unconstituted heterosexual man. A Jewish girl who refuses to be told she can't learn or think because of her role in society, and dresses up as a man in order to be able to do so; a prostitute who has to prove her sanity because she murdered her would-be rapist, and a psychiatrist who helps a macho football coach come to terms with the fact that he was raped as a child. There can't be many queers who have not 'passed' as straight at some time or other (often out of necessity), and it is such role playing that heightens an awareness of the artificial nature of social codes (and coincidentally produces camp culture). The consciousness of the disparity between public and private personas and the frustrations of social acceptability permeate Streisand's work to a reassuring extent for a queer audience not often given points of empathy at the cinema. Yet it comes as little surprise that the general response to such movies does not address their contentious subject-matter, but concerns Barbra's nose, her cross eyes, the fact that her hair is a mess, and the fact that, 'well darlings, I mean she must have been filmed through a foot of foundation and gauze

to look so youthful . . .'

Yet what makes her so appealing to me? After all I'm a twenty-two year old gay man with an engagement with queer politics, and a host of other, more contemporary, more radical icons to fixate upon. It's difficult to explain. So much so in fact that a gallon of gin and two million Guarana tablets later, I'm not a lot closer to understanding. The level of control that she exerts over her life and work in spite of resistance, is a crucial factor. Self-confessed showbiz queens (like me) having been on the wrong end (pun intended) of macho het posturing once too often need models of self-determination that don't rely on brute force. Streisand, in Hollywood, is about as self-determined as you can get (note the credits on *Yentl* and *Prince of Tides*), yet even the most sexist git would have a hard time sounding anything but peevisish (note the MGM mogul above) in saying she's done it 'by behaving like a man'. Hardly. Despite being the most powerful woman in Hollywood (and one of its most important figures, period) her work displays a subtlety and sensitivity few mainstream movies ever achieve. It is this contrast that lies at the heart of her appeal to me as a gay man. At the risk of sounding exruciatingly banal, she reassures me that you don't have to be vigorously manly in order to say what you want to say, even in that most male dominated and reactionary niche in Western mainstream culture.

Uncompromising

The movie *Funny Girl* is probably the summit of the Streisand divinity. It is the story of Fanny Brice, an uncon-

ventional looking performer who pooped on her dissenters by becoming a star; a role that significantly allowed La Babs to do the same. It expresses many of the elements of the milieu that energise her fans, and says as much about Streisand as it does about Fanny Brice: her fight for attention, her uncompromising stance on what was right for her, her meteoric rise from obscurity, her tragic love life and underlying vulnerability, and her sublimely camp humour. This was the movie that made Barbra a Star. During filming she became estranged from hubby Gould who could not deal with the tag Mr Streisand, and had a passionate relationship with Omar Sharif whom she self-deprecatingly thought was 'beautiful'. At the end of the shoot, knowing that Sharif would be returning to his family, and that she was about to blast off into enormity on her own, Streisand sings 'Oh my man I love him so / He'll never know / All my life is just despair / But I don't care' holding Sharif's hand off camera, tears streaming down her face (and those of just about every fag that's ever seen it). The clinch here is her expression of self-conscious sacrifice in the name of self-determination and control. A refusal to compromise, but a knowledge of its cost. At the risk of sounding disgracefully sincere (and unsound), watching Barbra express the cost of self-realisation in *Funny Girl*, with a box of Kleenex in one hand and a quadruple gin in the other validates my poofendom more than a thousand nights on the scene, a thousand networking meetings, a thousand tediously liberal films about 'HOMOSEXUALITY', or even a thousand nights with Tony Slattery . . . (or maybe not) ■