

# 95 Years Young

After eight decades of drawing Broadway, Al Hirschfeld says he's still got a lot of living — and working — to do.

By Sheryl Berk

Midtown traffic has made me late — very late — for an interview with Al Hirschfeld. I arrive at the artist's Upper East Side brownstone breathless and apologizing profusely.

"No problem," he says, ushering me into his fourth floor studio. "I've got all the time in the world. I'm not going anywhere!"

At 95, you'd think Hirschfeld would be a little time-conscious, but he shows no signs of slowing down ("I don't feel a day over 90!"). He recently created four *Seinfeld* collectible covers for *TV Guide* ("a nice show, but I don't watch it"), has a new book due out in the fall, and was feted with a birthday celebration at Sardi's. Ask him how many drawings he has to produce this week and he shrugs. "If someone calls, I say okay."

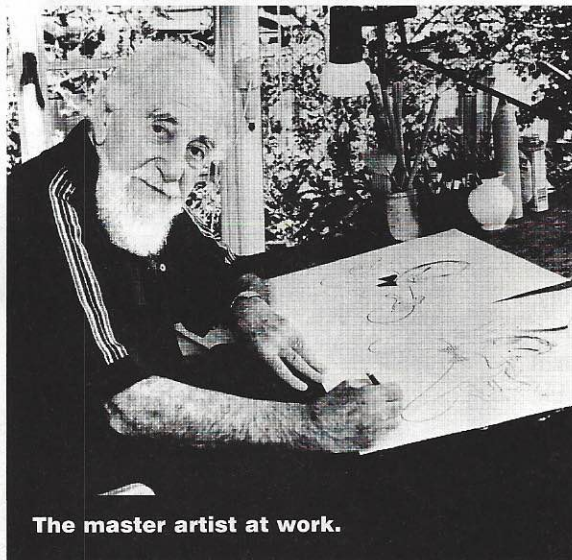
And how did he spend June 21, the big day? Hunched over his drawing board for "the usual time." Translation: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a brief break for lunch. In fact, he won't stop working even long enough for an interview. "You don't mind, do you?" he motions at a sketch of an actor taking form. "I can talk while I draw."

To Hirschfeld, capturing Broadway's best and brightest in a few strokes of a pen is more than a job. "People ask me, 'When are you going to retire?'" he says. "Retire from what? This isn't my work, it's my life."

It's a life that's been spent in the theater for the past 70 years, always watching from the wings. When Hirschfeld was 12, his family relocated from St. Louis to New York on the advice of

young Al's first drawing teacher. "She told my mother if I didn't get out of the Midwest, I'd be a window dresser." As a young man, he studied his craft at the Arts Students' League as well as abroad, spending months in Paris and the Orient. At the age of 23, he sold a sketch to *The New York Herald Tribune*. This led to regular work — producing art to accompany reviews — for *The New Yorker* and later *The New York Times*.

"In the old days, they used to send me out of town to see a show in try-outs," he says. "I loved the travel." But



The master artist at work.

now he's New York-based, often observing a cast in rehearsals. His drawings are due way before opening night, messengered in simple manila envelopes to the *Times* Arts and Leisure section. Up until a few years ago, he never even had a contract. "They asked; I did," he smiles of signing an official agreement with the newspaper. "Suddenly, I need it in writing!"

Hirschfeld is hired to capture what he calls "the heart and soul" of the play or musical: the drama, emotion, or spectacle being presented on stage. Not an easy task, considering he has only paper, pencil, and ink to do it with.

"If you ask me *how* I do it, I couldn't tell you," he says. "I just watch, and the idea takes shape. My best drawings are the simplest, the fewest lines. They just seem to flow. It's very subjective, because I am putting into the work what I am feeling, what the show is giving to me."

Don't, however, ask him to pick the season's hits. "I'd be a terrible reviewer," he admits. "Every show I see, I think 'This is wonderful! This will be a big hit!' Then it closes. Ask me what my favorite show is and I'll tell you it's whatever one I'm drawing at the time. I am such a fan of the theater — nothing more. I just try to put a little of the magic on paper."

For the past 29 years, the Margo Feiden Galleries has been the exclusive representative of Hirschfeld's work; an original drawing can fetch as much as \$30,000. "The way I

look at it, they're only worth what they mean to you," the artist says. "If they help you hold on to a wonderful theater experience, then I've done my job well." ■

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**SHERYL BERK, an aficionado of Hirschfeld's art, will soon need a bigger apartment to house her collection.**

# Favorite Drawings From Eight Decades



## 1998: Broadway Couples

“One of my most recent, it was commissioned by the *Times* to sum up the season. I like it because it shows how diverse theater has been this year — everything from German *Cabaret* performers to a pair of Siamese twins. And you notice they’re all drinking a glass of wine — well, they’re the toast of Broadway!” (Clockwise from top left: Patti LuPone and Peter Riegert; Anthony LaPaglia and Allison Janney; Marie Mullen and Anna Manahan; Alan Cumming and Natasha Richardson; Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner; Richard Briers and Geraldine McEwan.)

## 1929: *The Single Standard*, with Mack Brown, Greta Garbo, and Nils Asther

“I look at this and think, ‘Who drew this?’ It’s like another person! My style has changed so much since then — I was experimenting, finding my line so to speak.”





**1961, 1964: *Show Girl* and *Hello, Dolly!*, starring Carol Channing**

“Carol claims I gave her her start because I put her in a drawing of *Lend An Ear* and it ran on the front page of the *Times*. She’s a delight to draw — perhaps the best kind of face, because it’s so expressive. She invented herself — those eyes, that mouth. I just put it on paper.”

**1979: *Sweeney Todd*, with Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury**

“What I get a kick out of when I look at this one is Victor Garber [in the background with Sarah Rice]. Over the years, I see so many young actors and actresses grow from small parts into big stars. That’s one of the good parts about getting old.”



**1988: *The Phantom of the Opera*, with Sarah Brightman and Michael Crawford**

“One of two drawings I did of the show — this one is called ‘The Journey.’ It’s a very different style for me — using flecks of ink spattered on by flicking a brush. I was trying to communicate the depth of the darkness. The night is such an important element of the show and the characters’ lives.”



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