

In Theater

October 23, 1998

**Special
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Theater
Education**

**Wild Woman
of *Chicago*
Ute Lemper**

Patinkin Gets Personal

His Favorite Roles, His Over-the-Top Reputation, His New Broadway Show

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**The Other
Paul Rudd**

Mandy's Mission

Bucking convention (“Don’t I always?”), the singer boldly celebrates his roots on Broadway.

By Sheryl Berk

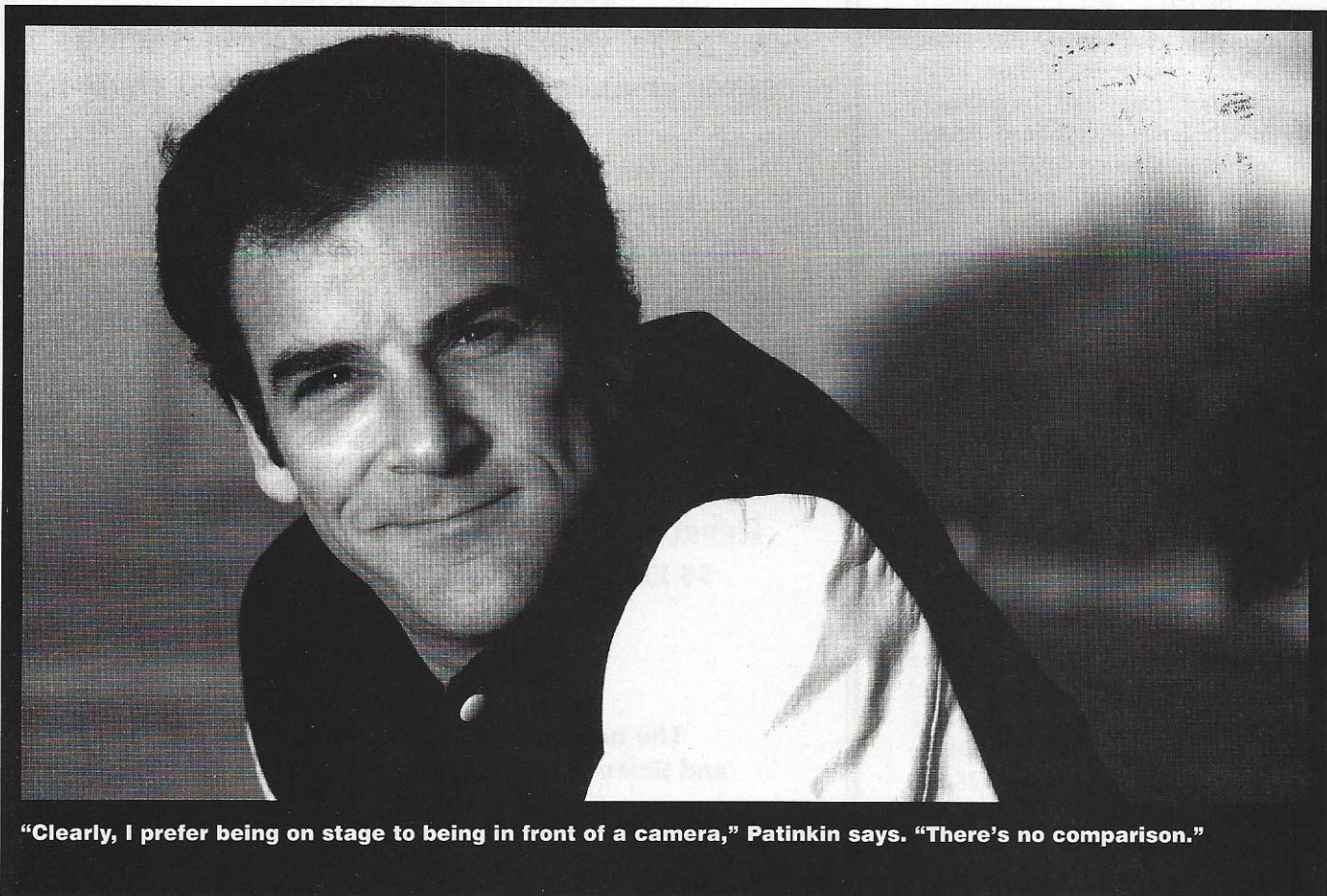
My grandma Miriam taught me a few words in Yiddish when I was a little girl, and there’s only one I can think of to describe Mandy Patinkin: *chutzpah*. His entire concert, *Mamaloshen* (translation: “Mother Tongue”), is

performed in Yiddish, yet he never spoke a sentence before tackling this project.

“It definitely took guts to commit to this — it was a monumental task,” Patinkin explains. “It was totally foreign to me, and the reservoir of material available was epic in scope. I didn’t

know where to begin and I found every excuse not to. I was frightened of it for a long time — eight years, to be exact.”

But fear became fascination. “I met [Yiddish expert] Moishe Rosenfeld, and he began to tutor me. He brought me hundreds of songs and I started



JOEL MEYEROWITZ

“Clearly, I prefer being on stage to being in front of a camera,” Patinkin says. “There’s no comparison.”

I was going to do it with Oliver Stone and Meryl Streep. We were about to go to Argentina when the whole thing fell apart. It was a glorious script — the part of Che was even better. My heart was broken. Then once this other thing was launched, I just had no interest — plus they didn't ask me! You know, I'm not as pretty as Antonio [Banderas].

When I was in journalism school, I remember John Simon wrote a vicious review of you in *A Winter's Tale* at the Public Theater.

He went after me and Alfre Woodard and Joe Papp.

Do you care what critics say?

If it's a live performance, I try to not read them while I'm doing it because they will affect my mood. I save them and read them later. Good ones will give me advice and teach me things — I've learned things from critics. You can see the difference between a kind-hearted, constructive criticism and someone who's trying to draw attention to themselves. But most critics say I'm over-the-top and too big.

Why is that?

Because it's true! And I've often said that I won't disappoint my critics. But just as an explanation to it, I started to study it in myself. When I'm recording an album, right before the take, I don't consciously say, "I'm going to go wild on this." I do what my feelings tell me to do. That's who I am. It's more important to be true to yourself than to listen to your critics. There is a gorgeous thing that my wife had engraved on a little piece of metal for me to keep in my wallet. It's a little poem by e.e. cummings: "To be nobody but yourself, in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you like everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human

being can fight and never stop fighting." So...it's fine.

Does it ever hurt?

Of course — I'm a human being. If somebody says something mean about me, it hurts.

Do you prefer doing concerts over playing a character in a show?

I love it more than anything I do. Concertizing is my way of getting to write the story that I want to tell. *Mamalosben's* a little different from my usual format: I wear a tux; I don't do patter with the audience; I wear grown-up shoes, not sneakers. I'm going to do a new musical in the spring, but I don't

children to sing with you on *Mamalosben*.

I asked my son Gideon to be on the album. He didn't want to, but I said, "Look, this is really important. This project is about passing it on from generation to generation." He reconsidered, and he's in it. And it is the biggest thrill for me.

You've been through so much these past few years: leaving the show, moving back to New York, a cornea transplant...

And I have to have the other cornea done in the next six months. I was diagnosed 15 years ago, and finally, I had reached the point where it needed to be done or I'd go blind. I got a 13-year-old's cornea.

And you've become a spokesperson for organ donations.

I am on the phone a lot with people who are terrified, and I walk them through the paces. Did you know that 44,000 people a year die waiting for organ donations? The United States is the greatest participant in the organ donation program of any country in the world, yet less than five percent of our population participates. I get calls from mothers of five-year-olds who need

new hearts. They weep on the phone, thanking me for anything I am doing to get the word out there. I like my privacy, but I may be willing to let a *20/20* or a *60 Minutes* film my next transplant if it will save lives.

Of everything you've done, is there one thing you'd like to be remembered for?

For always doing what I thought was right and relevant and not compromising who I am. I'd like that to be my legacy. ■

SHERYL BERK most recently interviewed Alice Ripley for *InTheater*.

Mandy Mania!

A few notable websites for worshipping fans

<http://members.aol.com/caresseb/mpmain.html>
Dedicated to "Mandy, Performer Extraordinaire," this site includes concert schedules, trivia, and fan encounters with you-know-who.

<http://home.att.net/~mosert/char/mandy.html> Named for his *Evita* showstopper, "Mandy, High-Flying Adored" features impressive audio and video as well as the author's personal photo scrapbook.

<http://members.tripod.com/~aater/index.html> "Mandy Patinkin: Dress Casual" houses a huge photo gallery and answers to FAQs.

<http://www.cosmoslink.net/~phantm/mandy.html>
"Mandy's Showcase" has an amazing array of articles, performance pics, reviews, even co-star links.

want to talk about it yet. Clearly, I prefer being on stage to being in front of a camera — there's no comparison.

You just returned to L.A. to film the 100th episode of *Chicago Hope*.

I did, but just for a week. I miss the cast and the crew, but I don't miss the life. I am very glad I gave it up.

Why did you leave a splashy role that won you an Emmy?

Because it was very hard on my family. It was impossible. I couldn't do both — I couldn't be a husband and dad and be an actor, not with that schedule. There was no time left for my children.

You actually asked one of your

chipping away at it." Patinkin organized the music into three categories: songs from the Holocaust, songs of Yiddish theater, and songs by Jewish composers. "It's become an obsession with me," he admits. "I have this tremendous thirst for knowledge — to know more, to understand more."

The result was an album released this year (Nonesuch Records), a July concert series at the Angel Orensanz Foundation Center on the Lower East Side, and now a Broadway staging at the Belasco Theater (through November 7). He will also write a *Mamaloshen* book for Simon & Schuster next year, elaborating on his research and the feelings the project has evoked.

Patinkin is passionate about this music — to the point where it's nearly impossible to get a word in edgewise. "If I ramble on, just stop me," he apologizes, then launches into an hour-long lecture about heritage and home and following your heart. *Mamaloshen* has clearly made him a new man — more reflective, more spiritual, more humble than you'd expect of the legendary Big Ego of Broadway. "I've been accused of being a bit self-indulgent," he says of his reputation. "Well, I finally found something that's more important than even me."

Did you always plan to bring *Mamaloshen* to Broadway?

Oh, God, no. I never thought it would come out of my apartment! It's been an incredible journey. We made the album because Joe Papp suggested it about eight years ago and I promised him [before his death] that I'd do it. This was about paying back my heritage, giving back to the culture that gave me the definition of who I am.

You've done a great deal of research into Jewish composers.

And I've been stunned at what I've discovered. Did you know that Irving Berlin's first language was Yiddish, yet he never wrote a Yiddish song? I find, however, that his music — and many other composers' — was intrinsically Yiddish. These Yiddishites were the teachers to Tin Pan Alley. They embodied the greatest gift for telling stories about family — about birth, death, life, pogroms, celebrations, weddings, everything. I found it so ironic that [among] these people who reached over to this land for freedom, the first thing that they did when they

and an amazing thing occurred when I was singing these songs in the studio. They made me feel 100 times more free. I can't figure it out. I never heard these things when I was a kid — so where does this connection come from? It's an enigma.

Yet you don't have to be Jewish to appreciate the music.

Not at all. The musicians who worked on this album with me are of all ethnic backgrounds, and they all told me the same thing: They were moved by these songs. It's about the immigrant experience as a whole. If there is any lesson that I wish to give anyone who comes to this piece, whether you're

Jewish or African-American or Russian or Hispanic or Native American or whatever, investigate it, seek it out. Because it will fill your heart in ways that you will not be able to explain. You won't need to explain or understand it. That's the gift that it gave me, and that's the gift that I want to give others.

Has it changed your life?

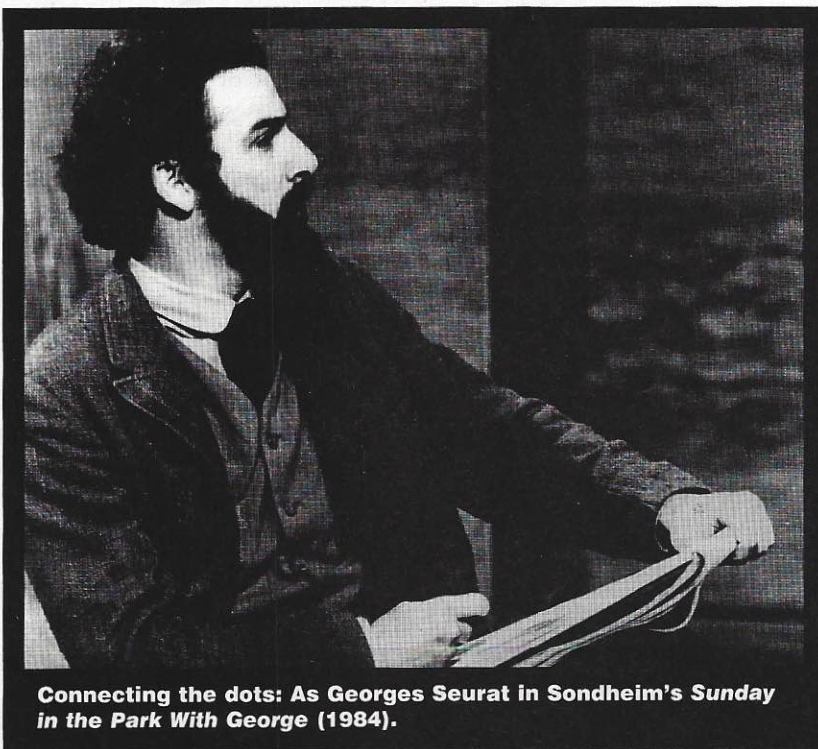
It has. I am not a reader, and this has ignited me reading voraciously. I can't get over how the

words and the images fire my mind.

How did you go about turning the album into a stage show?

Making an album is one experience — bringing it to stage is a different journey. My big worry was how do you make 99.9 percent of an audience who don't speak a word of Yiddish get something out of this? I toyed with some really out-there ideas. I thought, "Do I contact Jerry Robbins and have him create a ballet that I narrate?" But I wanted it simple. Then I hit on the Paul Simon song "American Tune" as the thread to lead you through.

What has the audience reaction been like?



Connecting the dots: As Georges Seurat in Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park With George* (1984).

got here was change their name. But these echoes were in these people anyway, even if they weren't embracing their heritage.

Yet you are embracing it.

And I think I am helping others embrace it as well. I took songs by Jewish composers like Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Paul Simon, and Irving Berlin, and we translated them into the Yiddish. This finished the circle.

Were you ever intimidated by the music — did you ever feel the language was an obstacle?

My wife [Kathryn Grody] always says I feel the freest when I'm singing,