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Lighting the Torch: The Filming of *Torch Song Trilogy*

Interviews With Harvey Fierstein,
Anne Bancroft, and Matthew Broderick



Lighting the Torch

BY JAMES A. BAGGETT

We open with a close-up shot of Harvey Fierstein's reflection in a brightly lit make-up mirror as he carefully applies black mascara to his thick false eyelashes. Draped in a burgandy velveteen bathrobe, he's shooting the opening scene for the film version of his Tony Award-winning Broadway play, *Torch Song Trilogy*, the ground-breaking celebration of the life and loves of Arnold Beckoff, the drag queen who knows that a good man is hard to find no matter which sex you are.

"I think my biggest problem is being young and beautiful," he growls into the mirror. The camera pulls back to reveal Fierstein in all his garish glory—surrounded by cans of hairspray, ostrich-feather plumes and Styrofoam wig blocks in a backstage dressing room. "It is my biggest problem because I have never been young and beautiful. Oh, I've been beautiful. And God knows

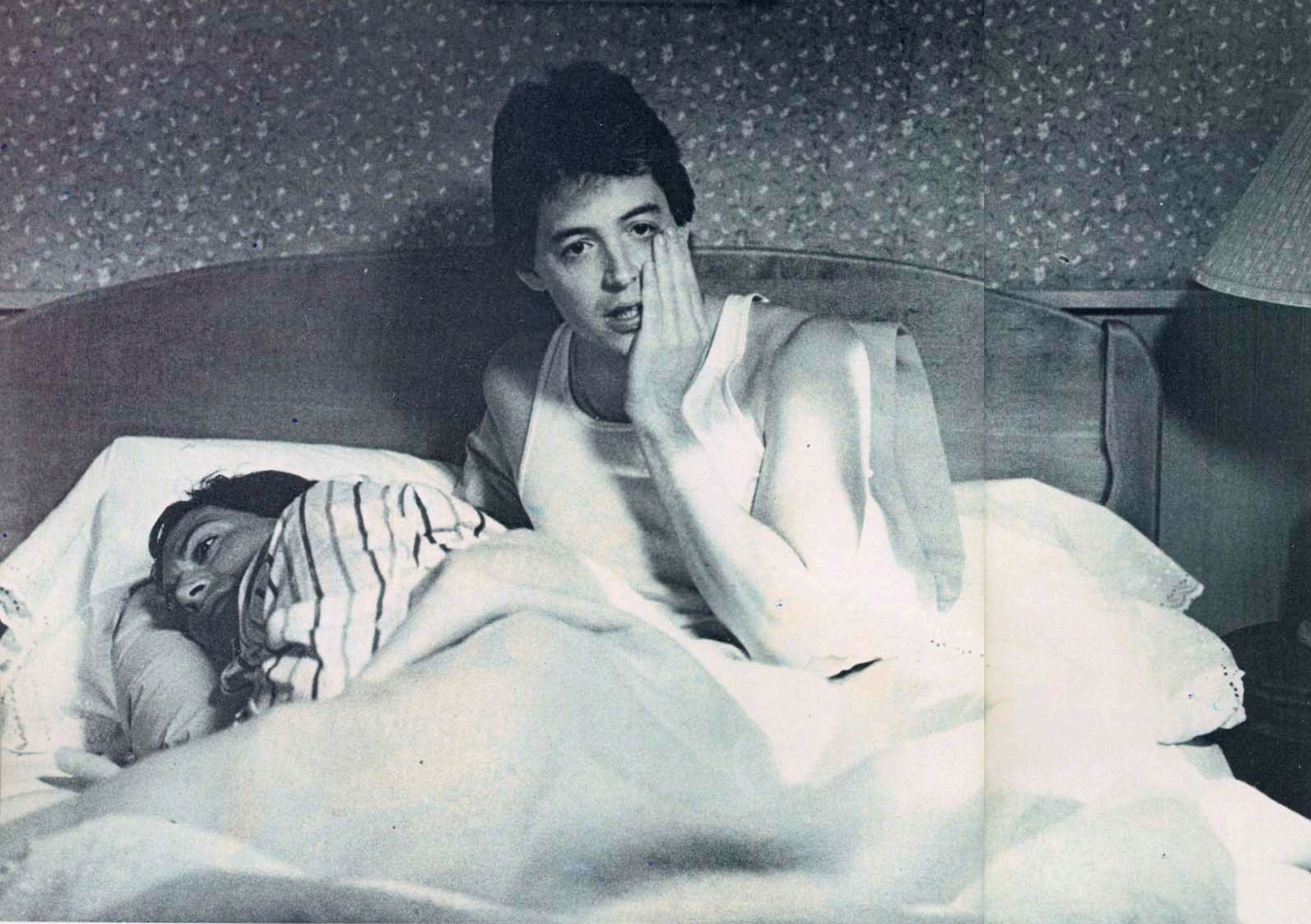
I've been young. But never the twain have met. Well, not so's anyone would notice anyway."

Midway through his monologue, Fierstein flubs a line and director Paul Bogart shouts "cut." Feigning exhaustion, the 34-year-old actor-playwright collapses on top of the dressing table. After he pulls himself together, he looks around and mutters, "I'm a jerk, I'm a jerk, I'm a jerk" to the patient crew surrounding him.

While he's waiting for the cameras to reload, Fierstein—he's wearing electric blue dress socks and flip-flops—saunters over to Bogart and yanks open his bathrobe, revealing a lacy black brassiere underneath. "You don't mind if I let this show, do you?" he deadpans. "Not if you don't," chuckles Bogart, an easy-going, heavy-set man, as he sets up the next shot. Fierstein takes a drag off a cigarette, a sip from a Diet Coke, and

Michael Paris/Sygma 1988





Harvey Fierstein and Matthew Broderick screen.

returns to his place at the dressing table. He glares at himself in the mirror and lets loose with a set-shattering belch.

Cut to the interior of the make-up trailer parked outside the North Hollywood warehouse which houses most of the movie's elaborate sets. It's the following day, and Fierstein, resplendent in a black spaghetti-strap number with blue sequins, matching jacket, fish-net stockings and a blue rhinestone necklace, is ready to discuss the changes he did (and insistently did not) make to bring *Torch Song* to the

"I wasn't out to preserve the play," he says (in his distinctive rasp that's been likened to the bellow of a foghorn), dragging a razor across the stubble on his chest. "So, that freed me a lot. I sort of came in as another writer adapting someone else's work. I figured anyone who wants to, can read the play. At the very worst, they can take a trip to New York and watch it at the Lincoln Center Library, which has a very nice performance of the play on tape."

The frankly autobiographical *Torch Song Trilogy* originally began playing in

1978 as separate one-acts at New York's legendary La MaMa Experimental Theater Club off-off-Broadway in the East Village. No theater would put on the entire trilogy (which ran over four hours) until The Glines, an off-off-Broadway gay theater group, took a chance with it in 1981.

Lack of attendance threatened to close the show until a rave review from *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow boosted ticket sales. The show moved to off-Broadway and eventually, in 1982, it finally hit the Great White Way, making Fierstein—to quote his now-famous

words—"the first real-live, out-of-the-closet queer on Broadway."

"The way I play Arnold has changed because 10 years ago I was the right age for the first act [*The International Stud*] and was playing it older for the third act [*Widows and Children First*]," explains Fierstein, as a heart-shaped beauty mark is painted near the corner of his mouth and a curly wig ("I call this my early Garland") placed on top of his head. "So, now I'm the right age for the third act and playing it younger for the first. But Arnold hasn't changed. He's just as innocent and romantic and dumb as always."

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Fierstein ignored earlier Hollywood offers (which mentioned Dustin Hoffman and Richard Dreyfuss as candidates for the role of Arnold) to produce *Torch Song*, because they wanted to focus only on the third act, in which Arnold's overbearing Jewish mother (played brilliantly by Anne Bancroft) visits her son; his confused, bisexual boyfriend/schoolteacher Ed (handsome Brian Kerwin); Ed's wife Laurel (Karen Young); and his adopted gay teenage son David (newcomer Eddie Castrodad).

Eventually, Fierstein hooked up with New Line Cinema, a smaller production company best known for cultish films like *Hairspray* and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, who put up its modest budget (\$10 million) and guaranteed Fierstein creative control over the making of the film.

Early on, Fierstein decided to set his film in the period between 1971 and 1980, before the onslaught of AIDS, safer sex guidelines, and the new "gay-monogamy." "Even if I placed it in 1988, it would still stretch back to 1979 because it takes place over nine years," Fierstein explains. "So, why not place it in the decade it belongs in—the Seventies? Realistically, that's where it belongs, in an age of innocence, where the issues aren't clouded by AIDS. I want to make a movie where gay people can see themselves as human beings, not victims of a disease."

Fierstein estimates that the majority of the crowds that saw *Torch Song* during its three-year run on Broadway were, oddly enough, primarily heterosexual. "My audience has always been women from 15 to 90 years old," he insists. "I've never had a gay audience. If every gay person who says they saw *Torch Song Trilogy* actually did, I'd be a multi-millionaire by now and the show would still be running on Broadway. I don't know why, but if gays don't see a show during the first two nights after it opens, then they lie about it and say they did. Gays always have to be the first to do everything!"

Some gay activists are said to have found the play's protagonist Arnold Beckoff too apolitical, too apathetic to the oppression of heterosexuals. But Fierstein maintains that Arnold is an Everyman who "just happens to be attracted to members of his

own sex."

"Everyone wants what Arnold wants, an apartment they can afford, a job they don't hate too much, a chance to go to the grocery every now and then, and someone to share it all with."

But there's no doubt in anyone's mind that Fierstein, a frequent speaker at political gay actions, is one of the most visible and flamboyant representatives of gay pride. He has never professed to be a spokesperson for anyone but himself. "I'm not a gay spokesperson," he insists. "I think of myself as a gay symbol. I'm somebody who has broken the rules and proved that all the lies they told you about coming out are all wrong. But I don't see myself in a historical perspective and I don't want to. If I thought about what to do politically, I would never have written *Torch Song* to begin with. *Torch Song* is not politically correct. [In the play], we fall into old stereotypes. We call each other 'girl.' I refuse to be politically correct, but I am correct artistically for myself."

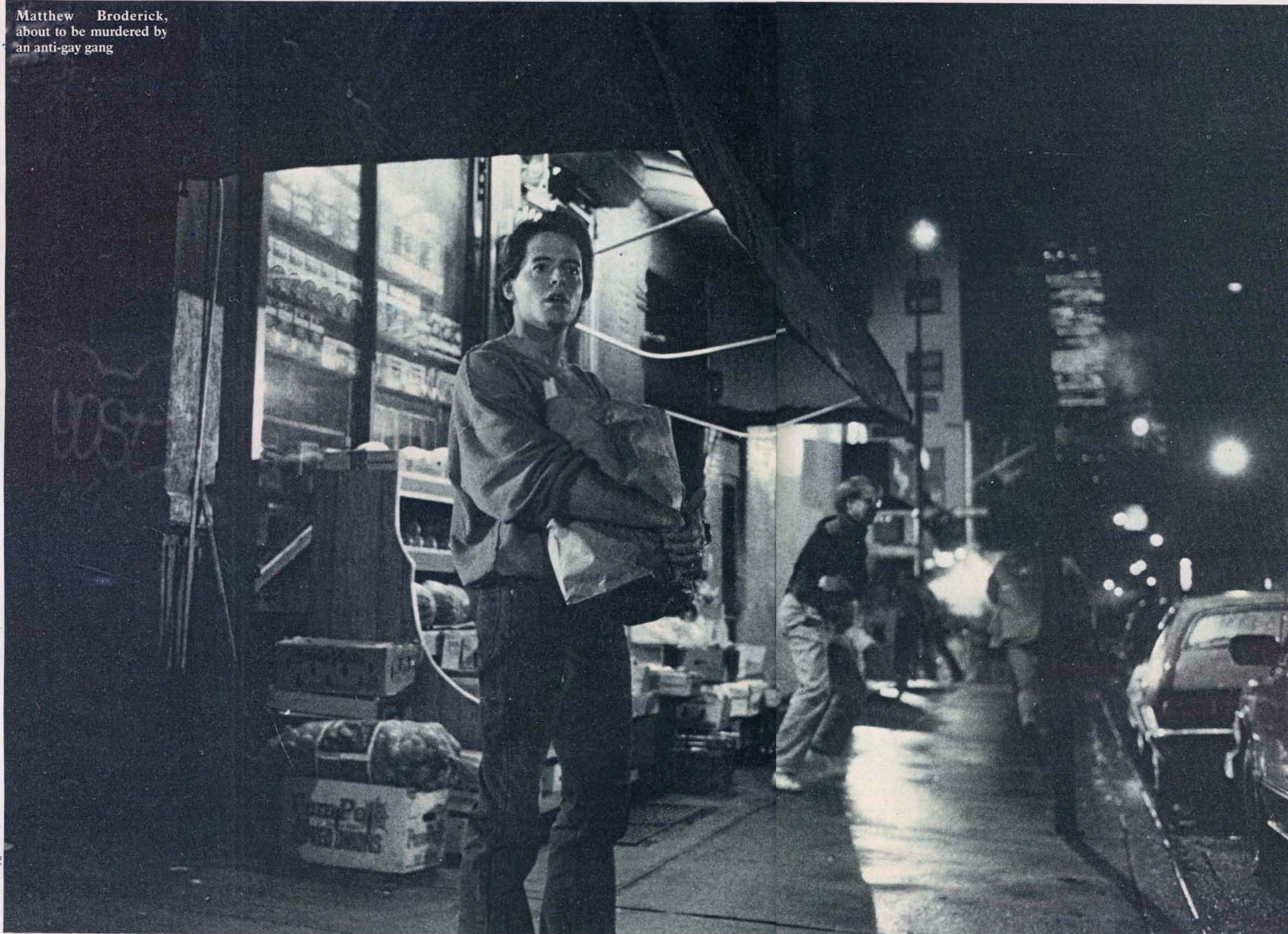
Which is one of the reasons Fierstein finally settled on Paul Bogart, veteran director of *Skin Game*, *Oh, God, You Devil* and television's *All in the Family*. Bogart had no objections about including the play's infamous "backroom scene," in which Fierstein as Arnold visits a gay bar and winds up in the backroom bent over with his pants around his ankles. He speaks directly into the camera as he's smoking a cigarette and being screwed. Although it remains to be seen whether or not the scene, which contains no nudity, will remain in the final version of the film, in the play it drew the loudest howls of hysterical laughter from the audience.

"I hate to think of this as an educational program," says Bogart, who insisted that Fierstein drop 60 pounds from his six-foot frame (he was then over 240 pounds) for the film. "It's just a story about demanding respect, about loving and losing love. I have a feeling that people who maintain anti-gay attitudes don't lose them so easily. They learn them too early and too hard. But I think Harvey knew that I could be

Michael Paris/Sygya © 1988

Matthew Broderick,
about to be murdered by
an anti-gay gang

Michael Paris/Sygma 1988



useful in preserving what was right in the play and by not spoiling it."

In translating *Torch Song* to the screen, Fierstein "opened up" the story so that audiences will now meet his best friend, Murray (played by *Ain't Misbehavin's* Ken Page). The movie will also feature extravagant musical scenes of Fierstein, Page, and renowned female impersonator Charles Pierce performing such classic torch songs as "Love for Sale" and "As Time Goes By" in full drag. (They go by the names of Virginia Hamm, Marcia Dimes, and Bertha Venation, respectively.)

Fierstein recruited 26-year-old Matthew Broderick, a proven commodity at the box office, for the role of his younger lover Alan, who works as a male model and eventually gets murdered in the East Village by a gang of "fag-bashers." Broderick made his professional debut in *Torch Song* at the age of 19, playing the adopted gay teenager when the show was running off-Broadway. Was Fierstein reluctant to cast Broderick (who, for the record, is an avowed heterosexual) as the object of his affection?

"Oh, yeah," he says. "Definitely. I mean, he's so pretty. I wasn't sure if the audience would buy him and me as a couple. That was one worry I had. The other was whether we could shift our relationship. We had a very strong relationship as an adult and a kid, but I didn't know whether we'd be able to create a relationship as two adults. I mean, you touch your son one way . . . and you touch your lover in another way. But I knew there would be chemistry between us because when you're friends with somebody for that many years you know that something is going to show. I just wasn't sure whether it would look like two lovers."

Fierstein readily admits that he went so far as to embrace Hollywood's oldest cliché: He fell head-over-high-heels for his leading man. "I managed to develop an incredible crush on Matthew," says Harvey, coyly batting his false eyelashes. "I did! Because when you're doing a film, you don't go home at night. You're working 12 to 14 hours a day and constantly thinking about it. I really can

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Brian Kerwin and Karen Young as Arnold's former lover and his wife.

understand how people fall in love with their leading men. Some of the people on the set found it to be quite obnoxious. What was funny, of course, was that two days after he was finished filming, I was quite sad to discover that it went back to friendship for me. It just snapped right back."

Still, how will the public respond to Broderick as a victim of gay-bashing? "I'm excited to see," says Fierstein. "I don't look at him as a star. I mean, to me he's my kid. I've known him since 1981, when he was still a roller skating, snott-nosed little kid. I look at him as Matthew. But as an actor I'm excited! I think his performance is brilliant and that the audience will really love him."

New Line Cinema is also banking on the box-office draw of Anne Bancroft. Although Fierstein insists that the role of Arnold's mother is not based on his own, he refused to discuss his relationship with his mother with Bancroft. "But she did

meet my mother," he says. "My mother came to the set and they spent some time together. Anne even managed to find a meaningful moment with her."

"What happened was," he continues, "I thought I would play this cute joke on my mother by showing her these pictures of me in drag. She was talking to Anne and flipping through the pictures. And there was no reaction on my mother's face at all. Anne and I were poking at each other and without looking up, my mother said, 'Don't think I don't know what you're doing. I learned long ago that there are more important things than what my son looks like in a dress.'"

Fierstein is the first person to admit that if a gay person is portrayed as being happy and proud and having a sense of family—like Arnold Beckoff—even well-intentioned heterosexuals will call it a "whitewash" of homosexual life. "They like to think of us as not even having family," he says. He's about to leave to shoot the scene where Ed's wife, Laurel,

confronts him in his backstage dressing room. "They like to think of us as people who live on the streets. It's totally shocking to me. It's like that old quote of mine: When the fuck did heterosexuals get the patent on the values of home and hearth and family and commitment? How can straight people possibly think that we don't have families? I just don't get it."

Right before the cameras are about to start rolling, Fierstein realizes that he's not wearing earrings. "Oh my God!" he bellows. "What's a drag queen without earrings? I would have shamed all of my people!"

Quickly and expertly, he slips on a pair of earrings. They are dangling red, white and blue ones. With his smart ensemble complete, Fierstein throws back his shoulders, sucks in his stomach, and lets loose with another of his requisite, pre-scene belches. He wobbles around in his black pumps and faces actress Karen Young. "God, do I feel gay," he boasts.