



Peter Mill

to theatrical, powerful women. I vividly remember seeing Carol Burnett on TV for the first time when I was three years old. Barbra Streisand, Bea Arthur, Elaine Stritch—I was drawn to their theatricality but afraid of it until [around age 14] when I thought, why not try?”

He honed his talent first in community theater in Rhode Island and then at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts in Natick before moving to New York City. But Mill found his plummiest parts in Boston’s musical theater scene including Mary Sunshine in “Chicago” at Reagle Music Theater and “Musical of Musicals: The Musical!” for Moonbox Productions, two roles that earned him IRNE award nominations.

Then came Moonbox Productions’ “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” and Dr. Frank N Furter, the fishnet stocking-wearing sweet transvestite made famous by Tim Curry in the 1975 cult movie version. Mill earned critical acclaim for his performance and a prestigious Norton award nomination as outstanding musical performance by an actor (Aaron Patterson won for “Parade,” also from Moonbox Productions.)

“I could not believe it. Most critics don’t give ‘Rocky Horror’ the time of day. You go through so many moments of ‘Why am I doing this? Am I really any good?’ Then you wake up to news like [the nomination] and you say, ‘I guess I’m doing something right.’ That show changed my life in so many ways,” Mill says. “I needed it artistically. I needed it personally. It was one of those roles I’d been waiting for. It was just a thrilling, thrilling moment.”

Now Mill will step into another ironic role when he plays Arnold Beckoff in Moonbox Productions’ “Torch Song,” Harvey Fierstein’s landmark play about a gay Jewish drag queen navigating life and love in 1979 New York. Directed by Moonbox’s artistic director Allison Olivia Choat, the show runs December 2–23 at the Roberts Theater at the Boston Center for the Arts.

“It’s a beast of a role and I’ve never really tackled anything like this. It’s my first play. I’ve only done musicals professionally,” says Mill. “Literally, the first five minutes are me getting into drag and addressing

Goodbye Dr. Frank N Furter, Hello Arnold Beckoff

Iconic queer roles are becoming actor Peter Mill’s specialty

For Peter Mill, it’s maybe not too much of a stretch from Carol Burnett to Dr. Frank N Furter in “The Rocky Horror Show,” the role that won him an Elliot Norton Award nomination in 2019.

But Mill, a Medway, Massachusetts native who left New York City in 2020 to return to his hometown, has been preparing for larger-than-life roles ever since childhood. “I was always drawn

the audience directly. It's a lot to take on. This play is such an important piece of queer history ... [Fierstein] was telling queer stories from a queer perspective at a time when no one wanted to hear it especially in the commercial theater. He's saying, 'Let me tell you on my terms' and laugh with me and feel with me."

After an Off-Off Broadway run, "Torch Song Trilogy" moved to Broadway in 1982 and won Fierstein two Tony Awards for Best Play and for Best Actor. For a 2017 Broadway revival, Fierstein combined his trilogy into one play retitled "Torch Song." When Mill saw that production starring Michael Urie and Mercedes Ruehl, "I realized it could still be effective and maybe I could pull it off," he says.

Moonbox had just reopened with a restaging of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" after the long COVID shutdown. "It was a scary effort to come back but we knew we could pull it off. It was a rousing success," says Mill. "[Sharman Altshuler, Moonbox founder and producing Artistic Director] came to my dressing room and said, 'What's next? Let's talk.' I sent her the

script for 'Torch Song' and she said, 'Let's do it.'"

Mill had tried his hand at drag performance in New York but quickly realized it was not his *métier*. "It almost killed me. I realized in that moment I have so much respect for what drag queens do; the pressure to come up with new material and costumes...I'm used to being given a script and a costume. Just the time it took me to put my look together was exhausting because I'm a perfectionist," he says.

But there's more he understands about Arnold's desire to hide behind a drag persona.

"In the monologue, he talks about the how drag is protection. I relate to that so deeply because when you're onstage, whether it's Frank N Furter or Mary Sunshine, you have armor; you are invincible," he says. "Part of what I want to lean into with this character, especially using the costume design, is what he's like when he's not on stage. For me, when I'm onstage I can be this glamorous person. But at home, I want to be in my hoodie and jeans and sinking into the couch. Drag gives you

permission to be the person you're afraid to be."

In between productions, Mill is still singing and entertaining. He performs his own cabaret act regularly at Boston's Club Cafe, a three-hour set with a pianist and occasional guests.

"Like with drag, I can't do constant new material but I do 'Little Girls' [from 'Annie'] in regular rotation and 'Rose's Turn' [from 'Gypsy']—all the big numbers I'd never get the chance to do otherwise."

Now that he's got the chance to tackle another outsized role, Mill is comforted by the support his Moonbox family. "I did my first show with Moonbox in 2012 ...I'm in good hands," he says. "They're not so much interested in what's commercially appealing and what sell most tickets. They are interested in telling stories that the artists in their community want to tell and doing the shows we're excited about. They take those chances and I love them so much for it." [x]

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by HARVEY FIERSTEIN



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