



BELLA BELLA

A PLAY BY
HARVEY FIERSTEIN

FROM THE WORDS AND WORKS OF
BELLA ABZUG



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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BELLA BELLA was originally produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer) on October 1, 2019. It was directed by Kimberly Senior, the set design was by John Lee Beatty, the costume design was by Rita Ryack, the lighting design was by Tyler Micoleau, the sound design was by Jill BC Du Boff, the projection design was by Caite Hevner, and the production stage manager was Laura Smith. The cast was as follows:

BELLA ABZUG Harvey Fierstein

BELLA BELLA is being presented by special arrangement with the Estate of Bella Abzug (Liz Abzug and Eve Abzug, Executors).

CHARACTER

BELLA ABZUG

SETTING

September 1976, 2 A.M.

Bathroom of a guest room at the Summit Hotel
on the east side of Manhattan.

Just outside of that bathroom awaits:

Martin Abzug, Bella's husband
Eve Abzug, eldest daughter
Liz Abzug, younger daughter
Mary Anne Krupsack, Lt. Governor
Midge Costanza, supporter
Harold Holzer, press secretary
Shirley MacLaine
Lily Tomlin
Gloria Steinem
Maggie Peyton
Carol Bellamy
Mim Kelbar, Bella's best friend
Joan Nixon, Bella's driver
Helene, Bella's older sister
Various aides, volunteers, and supporters

BELLA BELLA

The curtain rises on a bathroom in a midtown Manhattan hotel in 1976. The white and powder-blue tiled room is strewn with luggage, campaign posters, and discarded clothing. Through the distortion of the shower door's textured glass we see the silhouette of Bella, her famous hat perched on her head.

Bella steps from behind the shower door and into the light. The actor is dressed simply in black.

BELLA. (*Addressing the audience.*) Where the hell is Bella Abzug? She's stashed away in the toilet of a guest room at the Summit Hotel on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the middle of the night wearing nothing but her *gotkes* as she waits to be declared the first ever female senatorial candidate from the great state of New York. Where the hell else would I be?

You've heard of backroom politics and bedroom politics? Welcome to bathroom politics. We rented the whole ballroom downstairs. You'd think maybe they could upgrade me to a suite?

(*Indicating the door.*) And don't ask what's going on behind that door. Everyone I know, every nervous *chalaria*, is shoved into one hotel room.

They're camped out on the dresser, the floor, the desk, the radiator... And, *inmiten derinen*, my dear friend Shirley is strewn across the double bed wailing, "What's taking so long?"

She's an actress. They get emotional. I told her, "This primary is a five-way race. Every vote is going to count. And those upstate districts always take forever to report. But relax. I have never entered a race I didn't win. (*Thinks again...*) Eventually."

It's true. The first time I ran for reelection to the House, the Republicans gerrymandered my district. They blended mine with that of a long-time, well loved, liberal Democrat. They fixed it sixty percent his folks, forty percent mine.

Not that they wanted *him* to win. But the poor *putz* had throat cancer. They figured he'd knock me out and then, when he got too sick to serve, they'd slip their own guy in.

Yeah. Real big-boy backroom politics.

When I discreetly mentioned his cancer to a few folks they attacked me for spreading false rumors.

They got five doctors to swear the guy was perfectly healthy. They made that poor *putz* walk the entire district end to end.

It was barbaric.

Every reporter and editorial page called on me to drop out.

Even the people who knew the truth thought I was cruel; running against a dying man.

There was no winning. I lost two to one. But...a month later, when the guy died, they ran his widow against me and I got my seat back. See? It all worked out.

She ditches her hat.

God forbid I do anything the easy way. How many people get themselves into a five-way primary?

Shirley, the weeper out there, begged me not to do this. "Stay where you are until you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"To be president."

Well, she's not wrong.

Not about being president. But most folks see a House seat like mine as an annuity. They hold on to them until they're wheeled out in a box.

But does that sound like me?

I don't think so.

Not when there's actual work to be done.

In the House I'm one of four hundred and thirty-five with a staff of eighteen and just look what we were able to accomplish.

But when I get to the Senate I'll be one of only a hundred, with a

staff of nearly eighty... We can change the world!

And, pursuant to my own preachings, I feel it's time we have a woman in the Senate again. Too much to ask? One woman.

My best friend Mim, who also happens to be my speechwriter, came up with a great ad for this campaign. Maybe you saw it: A photo of a hundred men staring up from the Senate floor and the caption reads, "A stag Senate is a Stag-nation."

So, I stayed out on the street shaking hands as late as I could. But then I thought, "What are you worried about? You've had a two-point lead since the polls closed. Let's go up to the hotel room, relax, have a *nosh*, and watch the results on TV."

And when the last reports put me up another half point, Mim, who is right behind that door, her fingers poised over the keys of her brand-new electric Selectric typewriter, asks, "So Senator Abzug, what do you want to say in your victory speech?"
Senator?

A look of panic.

"You know what? Let me go into the other room. I'll change and take a moment to gather my thoughts."

Anyone who knows me knows I'll never change.

But let me tell you something: sometimes it's easier to be stared at by strangers than seen by friends.

So, here I am, in the other room, and...?

She indicates that her mind is empty.

Oh! Last night I had the craziest dream, I dreamt I was on Capitol Hill for the president's State of the Union.

The place was packed.

A tiny creature appeared in the doorway and announced in a booming voice, "The President of the United States."

And there she stood.

The place went wild.

Elegant, almost regal in a purple silk dress, she smiled that winsome smile of hers as she walked down the aisle clasping hands and exchanging good wishes.

She took to the podium and acknowledged the women of her cabinet.

She nodded to the nine female justices of the Supreme Court. Glancing up, she waved to the balcony where her husband and children, along with the husbands of her cabinet members, stood applauding.

Finally she motioned for silence.

The chamber was seated and she began to read from the teleprompter, “Ms. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, distinguished members of Congress, honored guests, and my sister Americans...”

And I suddenly bolted awake. “A male vice president?”

When I started this whole senatorial campaign a pollster handed me a survey and was surprised when I threw it back in his face. “Would you vote for a woman if she was qualified?”

Now why the hell does a woman have to be qualified when a man only has to be a man?

Women make up the majority of the voting public and what do we do? We elect men. And what do we get from those men?

Richard Nixon...

She spits between her index and middle finger.

Toi, toi, toi... had three chances to appoint a woman to the Supreme Court but claimed he couldn't find one qualified. And Nixon was elected by the same percentage of women as men.

Statistically speaking the gender gap in voting is less than two percent. Two. So, if women are going to vote exactly the way men do, statistically speaking, it almost doesn't matter whether we vote or not. Why then did thousands sacrifice their freedom, their families, their very lives to win us suffrage?

But can you imagine a day when women vote only for women? The men would never stand for it. They'd throw open their gun cabinets and declare a counter-revolution!

Well, calm down, fellas. Come the State of the Union the president will still be speaking only to you, “My fellow Americans.”

But I can dream.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting that all women have the same beliefs. I've heard plenty of women scream, “Drop the bomb.” And I've seen women throw rocks at little Black children

trying to integrate a school. We are not all good any more than all men are bad.

But to my grave I will defend the right of a woman to be an unqualified asshole and still become president just like a man.

And I'll grant that a few men have made great presidents. The problem is, they were so few, that we can name every one. But who here can count how many unqualified, lecherous, and corrupt men we've had to endure?

Shall we survey the last few?

FDR: I know, you saw that movie *Sunrise at Campobello* with him rolling around in his wheelchair and thought, "What a nice guy." And he did appoint the first female cabinet member. But, for nearly six years, 1938 to '44, he did almost nothing to stop the Holocaust. Eleanor begged him, "Open the borders," but, because of the Depression, his political life depended on economic recovery, not rescuing Jews, so...? So much for your Mr. Nice guy.

Harry Truman: a man so thin-skinned that he demanded a loyalty oath from everyone who worked for him. Can you imagine a president demanding a loyalty oath from the very people HE was elected to serve? And don't give me Jack Kennedy. With all of that Camelot crap, he was just another patrician in over his head. And did he love his military? "Pay any price, bear any burden, to assure the survival of freedom." Yeah? Hello Vietnam.

Which brings us back to Nixon. (*Repeating the spitting gesture.*) *Toi, toi, toi.* What can you say about a hypocrite who openly supports the ERA and then vetoes Childcare Protection? Son of a bitch wastes billions of taxpayer dollars dropping napalm on innocent Vietnamese but childcare is fiscally irresponsible.

And that brings us to that paragon of boys' club corruption—Gerald Ford and the glory of Watergate. Years of investigations, hearings, trials... Dragging the truth out of those traitors detail by detail... All to prove that no one, not even the president of the United States, is above the law. And what does he do? He pardons the son of a bitch, letting the world know that as long as you have powerful friends, you can get away with anything. Thank you, Gerald Ford.

BELLA BELLA

a play by Harvey Fierstein
from the Words and Works of Bella Abzug

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On one historical night in September 1976, Bella Abzug hides out in the bathroom of Manhattan's Summit Hotel as she awaits the results of her bid to become New York's first ever woman senator. Known for her fearless career as a lawyer, protestor, and champion of gay rights, one of New York's fiercest feminists must collect herself as her friends, family, and constituents (including the likes of Gloria Steinem, Shirley MacLaine, and others) hold their breaths just outside the door. The clock is ticking and the world is ready—just as soon as Bella is.

"Fierstein's incarnation feels as passionately determined as its subject. ...Fierstein captures [Bella's] political savvy, her fierceness, political nous, and sense of fun, wit, and mischief." —**The Daily Beast**

"...a lively and deeply affectionate portrait of the hat-wearing, barrier-breaking 1970s liberal firebrand." —**Time Out New York**

"...Fierstein [is] an eternally captivating storyteller who sprinkles the fond salute with Yiddishisms, zingers and amusing aphorisms. ... The solo show also serves quite transparently as a timely reminder of the wisdom of putting women in government."

—**The Hollywood Reporter**

Also by Harvey Fierstein
CASA VALENTINA

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