

The Sissy Duckling – By Harvey Fierstein
Book Review and Interview by Alan Bennett Ilagan

Every child has a favorite book ~ one that shapes their character and impresses itself indelibly upon their youth. Fairy tales and fables have long entertained kids, offering an amusing moral lesson cloaked in fantastical make-believe or conjuring a simple world of much-needed escapism. For the ostracized gay child, such escapism is often a matter of mental survival. Previously we had to search deeply for any sort of gay subtext in these tales, and then it was largely a matter of made-up Freudian psycho-babble. Now we have our very own gay fairy tale with the hatching of *The Sissy Duckling* by Harvey Fierstein.

Who better to put the fairy back in fairy tale than Mr. Fierstein? Known for his unmistakable raspy voice and three-dimensional true-to-life gay character portrayals, Mr. Fierstein is a genuine Renaissance man. From Tony-winning and critically-acclaimed turns on Broadway (*Torch Song Trilogy*, *La Cage aux Folles*) to the triumphs of the big screen (*Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *Independence Day*), he has never failed to enthrall, entertain, endear and educate. His latest endeavor is *The Sissy Duckling*, a children's story based on his screenplay for the HBO animated feature of the same name.

The Sissy Duckling relates the story of Elmer, a duckling whose interests include baking, decorating and painting. It's clear that Elmer is on the fast-track to GayLand and is subsequently ridiculed for it. He leaves home and learns to survive on his own like so many real-life gay girls and boys. When Elmer's father is in need of rescuing, it is Elmer who saves him, and thus the happy ending of acceptance and redemption. The twist is that the redemption is not for Elmer, but for those who abused and taunted him.

Accompanied by the whimsical illustrations of Henry Cole, the book is a pleasure for the heart and the mind. Mr. Cole has crafted an accessible yet witty world of family fowl ~ featuring a bathing-beauties-like swimming turban for Elmer's beach scene and a poster of Ethel Merman in "Annie Get Your Gun" for Elmer's room. Gay boys everywhere will relate to the trials of Elmer, even if being gay isn't yet a meaningful aspect of their lives.

For many of us a love for flowers and plants and decorating bloomed long before a love for beautiful boys. The best part of *The Sissy Duckling* is its blindness to sexuality. True, we all know what is really happening here, but for kids there is nothing but the moral lesson of accepting and embracing difference. Gay adults may display the story as they do their Tinky Winky dolls, but there is more going on than simple trendy-totem play. A theme of inner-strength runs through the story – a powerful message to all children, regardless of budding persuasions.

In this instance such strength is attributed to the sissy, turning the traditional meaning of the word around ~ glorifying and transforming it into something admirable. As Elmer comes to realize, it takes more guts to be a sissy than to be a football follower or one of the masses. "Sissy" was a word of dread for many of us as kids, and it is exhilarating and heartbreaking to think what a book like this would have meant had it been available in our childhoods. It is here now, and what a great gift Mr. Fierstein has bestowed upon our children, as well as the forgotten child within each of us.

Alan Ilagan interviewed Harvey Fierstein regarding what it's like being a proud sissy.

Alan Ilagan (AI): Your book *The Sissy Duckling* was originally a feature for HBO. Why did you decide to put it out as a book, and how do you think it will fare in its literary form?

Harvey Fierstein (HF): Although television allows you to reach millions of people effortlessly, there are some messages which need to be received in a more individual manner. I wrote *The Sissy Duckling* primarily for little boys who realize at an early age that they are different from most other little boys. This book gives them permission to be themselves. I want a little sissy boy to be able to hold the book in his hand, look at the drawings at his own pace, take in the message in his own way, and be able to cherish the validation with a great big hug. You can't hug a TV program. That's why I wrote the book.

AI: This would be a great book for those parents who see their kids struggling with being different ~ those of us who enjoy painting and gardening rather than sports. It's a wonderful way for parents to say "It's okay" and, perhaps later in life, "I know and I love you." What sort of responses have you received so far regarding the book?

HF: As I write this, the book has not yet been released so I don't know what the response will be from parents. But I'll tell you an interesting story: The other night, at a Broadway show, a woman came up to me and quietly told me her story. She has a son whom she identified as gay when he was only five. She thanked me for my work, my plays, my public appearances that helped her to accept and love her gay child. Now, at fourteen, he has come out. He is a happy, well adjusted young man who is being raised by a loving and grateful mom. If *The Sissy Duckling* can help another parent achieve the same balance then I'll be the happiest sissy in the pond!

AI: Do you feel that some parents might hesitate reading this book to their child, precisely those who may be calling their son a sissy? And how do we begin to reach those who need to hear this message the most?

HF: Homophobia, prejudice and bigotry are powerfully taught lessons. Can a single book overcome them? Most likely not. But, the pen is a mighty tool. And the brain is a worthy prize. And a heart, freed of hatred and prejudice, is a peaceful one.

AI: Your work has consistently been about acceptance and love, and your openness has always been admired. Stepping into children's literature seems an odd choice, but in many ways the next logical step. Oscar Wilde wrote a few children's stories, but his gay themes had to be hidden in ways no longer necessary. *The Sissy Duckling* goes so far as to scream "I am PROUD" in capital letters. It is such a crucial message for today's gay

youth. And while it may seem easier because society is more open, sometimes that very openness is what is most frightening to young people. What advice do you have for young gay people, particularly those who are just recognizing the differences they feel may have something to do with their sexuality?

HF: Most kids realize that they are gay or lesbian right at the age when all they want is to fit into the crowd. That's why coming out can be such a struggle. What makes it easier is to find others like you. To realize that you are not alone in the world. I advise all teens to seek out the Diversity club or group in their school. It's a terrific place, not only for minority kids, but for ANY kid who wants to feel a part of the greater society.

AI: What books did you read as a child, and how did they inspire you?

HF: I am a dyslexic reader, so I stuck to picture books for the most part. I loved all of the Dr Seuss books. I can still remember the chill of joy I felt when my Mom or Dad would bring a new volume for me to read at bedtime. (My Mother was a school librarian so books were always around us.) I believe that these picture books inspired me to become an artist. I did indeed study art from an early age right through my BFA in painting.

AI: How did the collaboration work with illustrator Henry Cole? Did the story come first, did the pictures inspire you, or was it an equal give-and-take along the way?

HF: I love collaborating on projects. I believe in the maxim, "Two heads are better than one". And each collaboration has it's own methods and rules. In this case I wrote the text of the book first. Henry Cole then created a series of sketches. Ideas were bounced back and forth between the artist, the editor and a little bit from me. The text was then adjusted to the drawings, the drawings again adjusted to the text, and the final result is a book where the illustrations and text combine in a wonderful seamless story. Henry Cole is simply the best.

AI: Your warmth, compassion and spirit pervade *The Sissy Duckling*. After all that you've been through, how did you retain those qualities, particularly when faced with words like "sissy" and "faggot" when growing up?

HF: Was I ever called names? Honey! I'm still called names!!!! And not only by homophobes. I get called names by gays and lesbians almost as often as by straights. It's part of the price of refusing to lie, in any way, about who you are. But the names do not define or diminish me. They demean and identify the name-caller. I am whole. It is the name caller who is wanting.