



Mandy Patinkin is a human Rorschach test. To some people, he is the most thrilling and fascinating stage performer extant; in the words of the critic Clive Barnes, "The greatest entertainer on Broadway today — period." To others, he is exasperating and overwrought, as best expressed in the affectionate and wickedly funny *Forbidden Broadway* parody, sung with great feeling and verbal tics to the tune of "Over the Rainbow": "Somewhat overindulgent, like I'm high, I interpret a lyric like I'm about to die."

Patinkin is in fact all these things, which is what makes him one of those performers about whom it is impossible to remain neutral. His fans adore him, excesses and all, for the depth of feeling, the conviction, and the passion he brings to everything he does, especially his singing. His detractors dismiss his emotion as affectation, and find his way with a song to be not so much fervent as frenetic.

"I never approach a song thinking that I'm going to be passionate or intense," he says. "I just do a song the way I feel it needs to be done. In many cases, the music pushes me to that place. It's not me so much as the words and the music. They trigger me. It's sort of like a Pavlovian response I guess."

Although most of the country best knows Patinkin as the brilliant and edgy Dr. Jeffrey Geiger on *Chicago Hope*, a role that earned him an Emmy Award, he is first and foremost a man of the theater. He won a Tony Award for his performance as Che in *Evita*, and was nominated for a Tony for his riveting portrayal of Georges Seurat in *Sunday in the Park With George*. He began performing in concert in 1989, and has received enormous acclaim for singing the music of such great Broadway composers and lyri-

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cists as Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, II, Stephen Sondheim, Cole Porter, and Jerome Kern.

From December 26 through January 5 Patinkin will be appearing in concert in California, first for three days at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, then for six nights at the Orpheum Theater in San Francisco, where his emotionally-charged, unpredictable, slightly *meshuge* performance should thrill a city that prizes individuality.

Music has always been central to Patinkin's life. He was born Mandel Patinkin 44 years ago on the South Side of Chicago, and began singing in his temple choir when he was nine years old. "I heard the men praying. I heard the music in the synagogue. And that's how music got into my bones," he says. "I think that cry in my voice that you sometimes hear comes from the synagogue. I remember a specific cantor we had, and the cry he had in his voice. I loved it. That's how I learned that if you felt something you went for it, you went for that place."

Patinkin started acting when some high school classmates invited him to join them at a local youth center, where they were going to appear in a production of *Anything Goes*. He was instantly hooked. He studied drama at Juilliard, and eventually began performing small parts off-Broadway. *Evita* launched a successful stage and film career. His theater work includes *The Secret Garden* and *Falsettos*, and he has appeared in such movies as *The Princess Bride*, *Yentl*, and *Dick Tracy*.

These days, however, the focal point of Patinkin's career is his concert work. "I love these concerts more than anything else I do," he says. Although Patinkin does a star turn, his is not your typical star concert. Dressed in a black T-shirt and casual slacks, he performs on a mostly bare stage accompanied only by the man he calls "the heart of the show," his pianist Paul Ford. "The nature of the show is very loose and very much like we're alone in my studio," says Patinkin. "The reason that there's nothing on the stage, no fancy costumes, no lighting changes, nothing, is so that people focus strictly on the words that I'm singing."

At a Patinkin concert, audiences are not mere viewers but an integral part of the show. Last January, at his final sold-out performance of a week-long run at the James A. Doolittle Theatre in Hollywood, seats were added onstage to accommodate an overflow crowd. During his first number, one woman seated onstage struggled

to take off her coat. Patinkin noticed and without missing a note offered his assistance, much to the delight of the already rapturous audience.

Before he launched into "Trouble" from *The Music Man*, he instructed the audience on where he wanted them to join in, admonishing them, "If you don't know this song, you shouldn't be here." He pulled a few people onto the stage to assist him with "Honey Bun" from *South Pacific*, and the spontaneous, occasionally surreal conversation that ensued was more entertaining than any scripted between-songs patter could possibly be.

"I'm completely affected by the audience," he says. "The audience really makes the evening whatever it will be. I give them all I can, but it's no different than having dinner with someone. It's how whatever you have to say is received. It's a two-way street, and that's why I love performing in concert. It's never the same. It is what it is for only that night. The next evening will be a different experience."

He once had a New York cab driver appear onstage with him. "The driver had brought me to work and had a lot of interesting things to say," Patinkin relates. "I said, 'If I pay your fares for the evening, will you come up and tell the audience what you just told me?'"

Beneath the silliness and the shtick is a performer deeply committed to the songs he sings, and to the composers and lyricists who write them. His diction is impeccable, and he approaches each number from the perspective of an actor, mining a song's drama or humor or pathos or romance. His delivery ranges from intimate and almost conversational to ornate and explosive.

"I choose songs that tell stories and embody ideas that matter to me," he says. "Sometimes they are complicated tales about how to live your life, how to end racism, how to be a good husband, a good father, a good person. Sometimes they're as simple as, 'have a good time, have fun, and be hopeful.' They are thoughts that I love to hear, written by geniuses, and I get to be the mailman."

His interpretations are highly personal: Patinkin does not so much perform songs as breathe them, live them, inhabit them. "I don't read music," he says. "So when I'm doing a song for the first time, I speak to the orchestrator or arranger in images, to let him know what I hear in the song. When I was studying at Juilliard, Leonard Bernstein would often come and conduct the Juilliard Orchestra. We were allowed

to crash the classes, and I remember that when he spoke to the orchestra he never spoke in musical terms. He spoke always in images. I would listen to the orchestra play, and it sounded pretty damn good to me. And then he'd talk to them about fire and water and cold and fear, and they'd play the music again; man, did it change. I never forgot that, and that's how I work."

Patinkin explains his ideas for a few of the numbers on his most recent solo album, *Oscar & Steve*, which features songs by Oscar Hammerstein, II and Stephen Sondheim. Some of his imagery is clear and straightforward: he sings Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carefully Taught" as if he is "Hitler on the podium addressing millions of people about hate. That's why you hear that echo on the final 'hate'." Other times his mental pictures seem so far removed from the song that it's a wonder his arrangers, Paul Ford and Eric Stern were able to make musical sense of his thoughts. For Sondheim's "There Won't Be Trumpets," Patinkin spoke of "a girl on a mountaintop. The girl is my daughter, and the mountain sails up so high that she goes into a cloud as Prince Charming comes to take her away, while I'm off in the distance shouting my good wishes to her." It's not that audiences are expected to hear any of this in the song. But the resultant arrangement enables Patinkin to plunge into the number with an increasing optimism that erupts into ultimate exuberance — an aural interpretation of his visual picture.

He is particularly affecting when he sings with simplicity and directness. Listen to his unembellished renditions of such classics as "You Are Beautiful," "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" and "I'm Old-Fashioned": his sweet tenor voice caresses the words and music with such ease and honesty that the songs have rarely sounded more elegant, more eloquent, more exquisite.

But Patinkin is far better known for his palpable intensity: for the manic energy he brings to "Coffee in a Cardboard Cup" or "Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum," and especially, for the whoops, cries and shouts that burst forth suddenly and dramatically in a crescendo of emotion in songs such as "Over the Rainbow" and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" The over-the-top fervency and urgency, the idiosyncratic — and sometimes downright strange — interpretations are what make Patinkin so compelling to some, and so annoying to others.

"When I first heard people go on

about my being 'over-the-top,' my initial reaction was, 'I've got to get rid of that,'" he says. "Then finally I realized, 'Get rid of it? That's who I am.' I understand that if you take that risk, there are times you will be very bad. But other times, something wonderful will come out of it. There are times that I take out some of the shouts or cries because I think they're too much. But there are other places where I absolutely want them, like in 'Carefully Taught.' It's a very conscious choice. When Stephen [Sondheim] first heard the *Oscar & Steve* album, he was concerned that I'd get hit by the critics for a few places where I go 'over-the-top.' And I said, 'Stephen, I wouldn't dare let down my critics.' He laughed and said, 'I love that line. I'm going to use it and never give you credit for it.'"

Probably no singer today is a more persuasive interpreter of Sondheim than Patinkin. "Stephen's perception about the human condition, and his simplicity and genius in expressing those thoughts, affects me very deeply," says Patinkin. "His songs are laced with struggle, but it is a struggle reaching desperately for hope and for a positive outcome. His point of view is not at all negative. It is the deepest and most positive mining of truth and hope that I've ever heard expressed. Oscar Hammerstein was Stephen's mentor and teacher and father figure, and I see echoes and reflections of Hammerstein's words and thoughts in Stephen's work. At the end of *Carousel*, Hammerstein wrote that wonderful scene in which the children are told, 'Believe in yourself.' Well, every word that Stephen writes is about believing in yourself."

They are words that Patinkin seems to have taken to heart. His belief in himself, in his talents, and in his music enable him to continue to take risks, and to continue to mesmerize audiences in ways wonderful and wacky. "I love what Cole Porter says in the song 'Experiment,'" says Patinkin. "Be curious, though interfering friends may frown. Get furious, at each attempt to hold you down."

There is one particular experiment that Patinkin would like to try. "I'm crazy about that *Forbidden Broadway* number," he says, referring to the "Over the Rainbow" parody. "I've got to learn it, because one of these days I'm going to do it in concert." □

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