During our marriage, I had the unique experience of seeing a Hirschfeld drawing before it hit the newsstands, of being present during The Process, at the drawing board, and before the NINAS were hidden.

Before our marriage, however, I had already been a keen as well as a professional observer of the art of Al Hirschfeld - albeit without the luxury of proximity. I was a theatre historian, and Al Hirschfeld was an essential, at times a definitive, original resource in the history of the American stage. Long before video cameras, it was Al doing the accurate recording of our greatest shows.

The first drawing of his I really studied was one commissioned by my first husband, Leo Kerz, for his Broadway production of Eugene Ionesco’s Rhinoceros in 1961. That’s the one where Zero Mostel transformed into the title character - a snorting, pawing, giant wild pachyderm. He did it right on stage without benefit of special makeup or special effects and terrorized his poor, shaking co-star Eli Wallach night after night, literally tossing him about the stage. But it was Al Hirschfeld’s equally remarkable theatrical art that, fortunately, captured the moment - in all its ferocity and power and originality - for posterity.

The scene was naturally the highlight of the play and since I worked on the production, I got to witness it at many performances. Knowing the original as well as I did, I couldn’t help marveling at the way Hirschfeld had encapsulated it in a line drawing, like some kind of visual shorthand, catching not only the look but the high drama of the moment. Hirschfeld’s accuracy of theatrical detail is by now legendary, but he also seemed to have some mysterious knowledge of the playwright’s intentions. Like a clairvoyant with a pen instead of a crystal ball.

After that dramatic start I always returned to Hirschfeld’s work to assist me in my research for museum exhibitions and television programs. Because of his incredible attention to visual detail and near photographic eye, Hirschfeld’s drawings provide a wealth of visual history not only of the theatre but of American cultural life. Since his art runs like connective tissue through nine decades, his drawings are sociologically as well as aesthetically indispensable. In fact, a Hirschfeld is often more revealing than a camera, because of the drawing’s flair and fluidity of movement, and added dimension over mere photography or videography.

THE LINE KING’S LIBRARY is filled with research from the archives of theatre, music, dance and literature. Enjoy your exploration of those hidden treasures. Thanks to talented archaeologists David Leopold and Barbara Cohen Stratyner for leading the hunt.

LOUISE KERZ HIRSCHFELD
President, The Al Hirschfeld Foundation

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Al Hirschfeld’s career began at Goldwyn Pictures in 1920 across the street from the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library, and over the next nine decades, Hirschfeld and the Library became even closer. Hirschfeld availed himself of the Library’s book and picture collections, he attended its events, and was a lifelong supporter. He encouraged Billy Rose to support the Library’s burgeoning theatre collection, and suggested to others that they give their collections to the Library.

Over the years, the Library has collected original Hirschfeld drawings, paintings, and prints, and its shelves are filled with books and publications featuring Hirschfeld artwork (including fifty years of the Best Plays series), as well as posters, album covers, and all manner of ephemera. His barber chair and drawing table, where he created virtually all of his work, now greet visitors to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts on the plaza of Lincoln Center. THE LINE KING’S LIBRARY showcases the richness of the Library’s Hirschfeld collection, as well as the ubiquity of Hirschfeld’s artwork over his eighty-two year career and beyond.
The name Al Hirschfeld (1903 – 2003) has virtually been synonymous with Broadway since his first theatrical drawing was published in December 1926. But by then, he was a six-year veteran of movie studio publicity and art departments, having already worked for Goldwyn, Universal, Pathé, Selznick, Fox, First National, and Warner Brothers. “I lived in the movies,” he says of his early years, and it was in films that he discovered his gift of caricature. Hirschfeld supplied iconic artwork for posters, programs, heralds, trade ads, and billboards, for every studio in Hollywood from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* to *Gangs of New York*. In his film art, Hirschfeld began to explore how each line of his drawings had to create a visually compelling work that attracted attention in the briefest possible interval. He learned to purify the pictorial detail of his drawings and quickly gained a confident authority.

Hirschfeld’s caricatures debuted during the genre’s vogue in the 1920s, but in little more than a decade he towered over the field. His style stands as one of the most innovative efforts in establishing the visual language of modern art through caricature in the 20th century. Instead of relying on simple recognition, he employed a palette of graphic symbols to translate the action of the whole body into line drawings that have become the *lingua franca* of generations of actors and audiences. The best loved of these symbols is NINA, his daughter’s name which he began hiding within his work in 1945.
“Line as movement - prancing, skipping, twisting and dancing,”

according to critic Michael Kimmelman, “was the vehicle through which Hirschfeld conveyed the adrenaline rush of live theater and his absorption in the here and now, resulting in art that looks eternally, uncannily fresh.”

At the age of twenty, Hirschfeld took a studio on West Forty-second Street with the newly arrived Miguel Covarrubias and was bitten by the bug of caricature that Covarrubias had brought from his native Mexico. Hirschfeld’s friendship with John Held Jr., who literally invented the look of the Jazz Age in his drawings, was just as crucial in the young artist’s development. Held’s thin line was an important ingredient in Hirschfeld’s early caricatures, and Held’s success and its attendant responsibilities left a lasting impression on Hirschfeld.
A ten-month stay on the island of Bali in 1932 would cement Hirschfeld’s interest in the graphic possibilities of line. “It was in Bali that my attraction to drawing blossomed into an enduring love affair with line.” Enchanted by the dramatic shadows of Javanese puppets and the art of the island, Hirschfeld’s sympathetic reaction to this environment instilled a belief that caricature expressed the magic of a child’s world. When he returned to New York, the spotlight replaced the dramatic sunlight of Bali in Hirschfeld’s pictures. He gave up easel painting altogether and focused on what interested him most: image in pure line.

Hirschfeld looked with an artist’s eye but with a journalist’s intent to capture the magic of performance. One of Hirschfeld’s greatest challenges was to avoid “creating stereotyped drawings of stereotyped subjects.” Appearing regularly in the paper (as well as many other publications) was a sign of success, but the ubiquity came with a price: Hirschfeld had to reinvent himself for each drawing in order to remain fresh. A playwright may have to come up with a new angle for his work every season; Hirschfeld had to do it every week. With the theater, an art form that included scores of handsome leading men, attractive leading ladies, young ingénues, earnest love interests, tragic heroines, and dastardly villains, etc., his subject remained more or less the same, but Hirschfeld’s response did not. One drawing might be a complex composition with a cast of characters, and the next might be
a minimal portrait of a single performer, followed by a work defined by light and shadow, before another drawing with vigorous cross-hatching and suggestive brushwork. Hirschfeld created his own graphic problems, but always in service of his subject. His embrace of the moment has kept his work from being dated. “The work never happens in the past tense,” says Jules Feiffer. Look at what’s on Broadway today: The Glass Menagerie, Chicago, Pippin, Romeo and Juliet, The Phantom of the Opera, Mamma Mia! Annie, The Trip to the Bountiful, The Winslow Boy, and Cinderella—all drawn by Hirschfeld in one production or another. Now look at this exhibition whether at the art physically on the walls or digitally throughout the installation, you might be forgiven if you think he’s drawing this season. The current Tony Best Musical, Kinky Boots, plays at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre (potions of the dedication ceremony can be seen in the exhibition), so he remains a presence on Broadway.

We hope this exhibition works much like a Hirschfeld drawing in that you gain insight and leave with a smile. As the playwright William Saroyan wrote in 1941, “I like everything of Hirschfeld’s I’ve seen. I don’t know why and I know I don’t need to know why. I like people like Hirschfeld because they’re the best, and I like what they do because they can’t help it and only want you to be happy.”

DAVID LEOPOLD

David Leopold is an author and curator who has organized exhibitions for institutions around the world. He has been the archivist of Al Hirschfeld’s work for more than two decades.

To learn more about Al Hirschfeld and his work, please visit www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org or follow it on Twitter @ AlHirschfeld. Please visit www.nypl.org to learn more about the Library collections and services.
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Al Hirschfeld is represented by The Margo Feiden Gallery, New York.

Below
Men In White
Ink on board, c. 1971
of original 1933 Group Theatre production
PUBLIC PROGRAMS

THURSDAY
October 24 at 6:00 p.m.
LIGHT AND LINE: DEPICTING PERFORMING
Curators Barbara Cohen-Stratyner and David Leopold look at the illustrators and photographers who covered Broadway and popular entertainment in the 20th century, and how they used black and white to create our memories.

THURSDAY
November 14 at 6:00 p.m.
HIRSCHFELD’S HOLLYWOOD
The name Al Hirschfeld has virtually been synonymous with Broadway since his first theatrical drawing was published in December 1926. But by then he was a six-year veteran of movie studio publicity and art departments, having already worked for Goldwyn, Universal, Pathé, Selznick, Fox, First National, and Warner Brothers. Hirschfeld archivist David Leopold will trace Hirschfeld’s nine decades of film art, followed by a curatorial tour of the exhibition.

MONDAY
November 18 at 6:00 p.m.
THE LINE KING: THE AL HIRSCHFELD STORY
1996, 87 minutes
Directed by Susan Dryfoos, who will present at the screening.
This Oscar-nominated documentary is a portrait of Al Hirschfeld featuring rare home movies, special appearances by his celebrity subjects, and interviews with his late wife Dolly Haas, and daughter Nina. The artist emerges as a brilliant, delightful, quirky, and compassionate observer of humanity.

Bruno Walter Auditorium
111 Amsterdam Avenue
www.nypl.org/lpa

Programs take place in the Bruno Walter Auditorium. Admission to all LPA programs is free and on a first come, first served basis. Doors open 30 minutes prior to each program unless otherwise noted.

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