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Tommy Femia as Norma Doeman (Photo by Milton Perry)

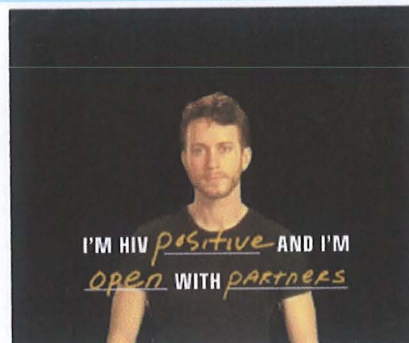
## 'Dirty but hilarious' take on 'Sunset Boulevard'

Femia as Doeman: Nobody does Norma better!

BY JERRY TALLMER

Published: Thursday, March 11, 2010 2:03 PM CST

The great silent screen star Norma Doeman salts much of her conversation with exclamation marks, like this: "You lie, lie, lie, lie!!!!"



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### We deserve better

This was supposed to be the year for marriage equality and other progressive LGBT breakthroughs. In Washington, the nation witnessed the historic inauguration of the first African-American president, a compelling, transformational leader who took office voicing the strongest pro-LGBT agenda in history. In Albany, after 40 years, the Democrats finally were back in control of the State Senate. There, they offered the promise of enacting three key pieces of legislation that the former Republican leadership had stood in the way of—marriage equality, transgender rights and a school anti-bullying law with protections based on sexual and gender identity.

Updated: Thursday, July 16, 2009 3:56 PM CDT

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They still want me!!!! Me! Me!! Me!!! Me!!!! Me!!!!!! Me!!!!!!! Me!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Actually, it's playwright Stephen M. Stahl who put those exclamation marks in there — reproduced here directly from his script — while it's actor Tommy Femia, as Norma, who gets to voice them.

Femia would seem to be no stranger to exclamation marks, since the headings of his other incarnations have included "Tallulah!" and — twice a month, for 21 years now, at Don't Tell Mama up on 46th Street — "Judy Garland Live!"

Somehow the exclamation mark slipped off the "Norma Doesmen" title of the show. In any event, it doesn't take much brainpower to unscramble "Norma Doesmen," with or without exclamation mark, as Norma Desmond — the wacko over-the-hill Golden Oldie enchantress so brilliantly portrayed in 1950 by Gloria Swanson (1899-1983) in Billy Wilder's knockout "Sunset Boulevard."

"She should have won the Oscar," says Femia, "but look who she was up against: Judy Holliday [who did win it that year] for 'Born Yesterday' and Bette Davis and Anne Baxter of 'All About Eve.' "

There have been other Norma Desmonds over the years, thanks mostly to Andrew Lloyd Webber's London and Broadway musical, but to Femia "the best one was and always will be Gloria."

The four characters of "Norma Doesmen" are counterparts of the four central figures in Wilder's great movie: Norma Desmond herself (Gloria Swanson/Tommy Femia); Max, the former world-famous motion picture director who is now her protective manservant (Erich von Stroheim/Ken Shepard); Joe Gillis — changed to Dillis — the stone-broke young screenwriter she takes to board and bed (William Holden/Bryan Caine); and Joe's idealistic girlfriend Betty (Nancy Olson/Christina Giordano).

But they are very different from the originals in a number of ways, chiefly the sexual content and orientation and impolite language in which these matters are broached — brought out into the open, if you will. And the most foulmouthed of all turns out to be good old tight-lipped man-hungry Max.

"Yes," says Femia, "it's filled with double-entendres and in-your-face vulgarity, but not in a negative way. It is a farce. A take-off. An interpretation. An homage to Swanson's performance. It's possible to do an exact replica, but this is my interpretation, and there's just as much me in it as Gloria."

He also gets to wear a variety of Norma's once-elegant gowns. Through it all, one sees Swanson. But the ending of "Norma Doesmen" is also very different from that of "Sunset Boulevard," and will not be given away here. But here's a bit of its lead-in:

NORMA: Don't hate me, Joe. I did it because I need you. I need you as I never needed you. Me, me, me, me. I need you. Look at me. Me, me, me, look at my hands, look at my face, look under my eyes. How can I go back to work if I'm wasting away under this torment? At least you could give me a little, every now and then.

Joe, you don't know what I've been through these last weeks. I got myself a revolver. You don't believe me, but I did, I did!!!! I stood in front of the mirror, only I couldn't make myself do it. After all, my life is worth so much more than most, how could I be so selfish as to deprive the world of me! Me! Me!! ME!!!!

It wouldn't be fair to all those people out there in the dark. Those small, trivial, tiny little, unimportant cave dwellers who need me, me, me back up there on the screen to fill their dull lives!!! I can't disappoint them. Only, if I'm to work, I need sleep. I need quiet, I need you!!! Don't just stand there hating me! Shout at me, strike me!!!!

MAX [listening offstage]: Oh please!...Hit me! Beat me! Slap me around and then tell me I'm butch!!!!!!!!!!!!

Thus the transition from Wilder to Stephen M. Stahl. What Wilder would say about it, no one knows. Well, I think maybe I know. After all, Billy Wilder (1906-2002) is the barbed-tongue man who was, once reported to have said to tyrannical Otto Preminger, one German Jewish refugee to another: "Otto, I will not fight with you; I still have relatives in Germany."

Tommy Femia had worked with Stahl on "Tallulah!" 15 years ago. Now, this past January, he received out of the blue a phone call from California.

"It was Stephen Stahl telling me about this play he'd written, saying it was 'dirty but hilarious.' I had five days to read it and make up my mind. On the fifth day I called him and said: 'I'm on board.' "

The producers would be Jim and Kathy Lyons of New Hope, Pennsylvania, and Stahl himself would direct it. "Sunset Boulevard" had always been one of Femia's favorite movies, and now he watched it a couple of times anew.

Femia, like Stahl, looks back with regret on the death of the old Hollywood studio system where professionals — actors, directors, designers, writers, everybody — would turn out three pictures a year come rain or come shine for better or for worse.

Tommy Femia (pronounced Femme-ia), the son of Cosmo and Ann Barzaghi Femia, has to date only been in one movie — a bit in "Stonewall" (1995) as Judy Garland singing "Zing Went the Strings of My

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Updated: Thursday, March 11, 2010 2:11 PM CST

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Heart" just before the police bust and the first of the Stonewall Inn riots that gave birth to the Gay Liberation movement.

And where were you that day, Mr. Femia?

"Where was I? Probably in grade school. My birthday? June 25. What year? Just tell them I'm forty-ish and was born and raised in Brooklyn. Went to public schools, then to high school at Performing Arts." And lives now in White Plains with his partner of 23 years, David Stevens, a chef.

Exclamation mark!

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