

# AL HIRSCHFELD

"One good line in a Hirschfeld drawing is worth a thousand good words," quipped Brooks Atkinson, whose respected words appeared alongside Al Hirschfeld's likenesses on the theater pages of the *New York Times*. Acknowledging the artist's awesome potency, Brenda Gill of *The New Yorker* notes: "To be a star on Broadway is to drawn by Hirschfeld." "His portraits need no identifying labels," stated Lloyd Goodrich, Director Emeritus of the Whitney Museum of American Art. "They are more like the person than the person himself." And actor Jack Lemmon summed it all up when he said, "If Al Hirschfeld hasn't drawn you – you don't exist."

Al Hirschfeld, whose career spanned 82 years as a professional artist, could have achieved fame just for his sheer endurance. Over the years, his witty hand fashioned some 12,000 drawings. His caricatures – or "modern portraiture" as described by Hirschfeld archivist David Leopold – of film and theater artists succinctly captured their essence in a few pen strokes and appeared on movie posters, magazine covers and newspapers from 1926 until his death at 99 on January 20, 2003.

Born in St. Louis in 1903, Hirschfeld was recognized as an art prodigy by the time he was five years old. When he was 12, his family headed to New York City, hoping to give their son more artistic opportunities. The first one came in the form of a "gopher" job in the art department of Samuel Goldwyn Studios, where his talent was soon noticed; by the age of 18, he was the art director of Selznick Pictures. He went on to design movie posters for Warner Bros. and Fox, and prolifically for MGM (where his illustration virtually defined the look of the Marx Brothers) and United Artists.

In 1945, Hirschfeld marked the birth of his daughter Nina with an innocent prank that would become as much his signature as his signature – he included her name in the background of a drawing. Since then, he has engaged in the "harmless insanity," as he called it, of hiding "NINA" at least once in each of his drawings, working the conveniently "liney" name into curtains, costumes, hair-dos, and props, much to the fascination of his fans. Not to be too sly, he began in 1960 to place a number next to his signature indicating the NINA quotient of each drawing.

The aggregate of Hirschfeld's work is monumental. Most renowned for his *New York Times* illustrations that became the staple of the publication, he was given "an exhibition every Sunday" for seventy-six years as a chronicler of the American theater of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His works are in the Smithsonian Institution, The National Portrait Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of the City of New York, the Lincoln Center Library, The Brooklyn Museum, The Fogg Museum of Harvard University, St. Louis Art Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, and many other museums and institutions in the United States, Europe and Asia.

In 1996, a documentary of his life was produced called *The Line King*, a moniker that has continued to crown his reign as "Chairman of the Drawing Board." Hirschfeld's unique contribution to the art of the film world was honored in 2001 with an exhibition titled *Hirschfeld's Hollywood* at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills. The show featured more than 250 drawings, paintings, posters and sketches, covering 81 years of work, the largest retrospective to date. Ironically, what was intended to be a 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party and celebratory renaming ceremony of Broadway's Martin Beck Theater as the Al Hirschfeld Theater on June 23, 2003, turned out to be a bittersweet memorial tribute to the artist who memorialized Celebrity with his pen.