



St. Louis

undefined

by **Chris Gibson** April 1 <http://www.broadwayworld.com/st-louis/article/BWW-Reviews-Funny-and-Touching-BUYER-CELLAR-by-The-Repertory-Theatre-of-St-Louis-20150401>



Playwright **Jonathan Tolins** uses **Barbra Streisand's** book *My Passion for Design* as a jumping off point for his hilarious one man show *Buyer & Cellar*. It's a fun-filled romp that fans of the lady with the magnificent voice, and questionable temperament, will find absolutely delightful. Even if you're not a fan, you'll enjoy this peek inside the peculiarities that are a part of this showbiz icon's lifestyle. The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis has fashioned a very enjoyable production that has been so popular that the run has been extended twice. See it for yourself and you'll know why. It's an amusing and often belly laugh inducing work that you should make every effort to check out!

Though this a work of fiction, one wonders how close to the bone some of this material cuts. What we have is a particular point of view presented by struggling actor Alex More, who has taken on the responsibility of being the caretaker for Barbra's enormous collection, which fills the basement of a barn, and is organized into a little shopping plaza complete with specialty shops that contain items the star has collected over the course of her career. This odd occupation allows him to interact with the woman herself, and though most of these encounters produce their fair share of laughter, some are more sensitive and revealing in other ways.

Jeremy Webb does outstanding work as Alex, but this being a one man show, he also gets the opportunity to portray his persnickety boyfriend Barry, who's an estate manager, as well as Streisand's husband **James Brolin**, the ubiquitous **Oprah Winfrey**, **Arthur Laurents** (famed playwright, screenwriter and director), **Bea Arthur**, and of course, Barbra herself. It is truly a tour de force performance, and it will leave you in stitches. Webb also nicely handles some moments of poignancy that arrive unexpectedly here and there over the course of a little over an hour and a half.

Wendy Dann's direction is neatly crafted, and she makes the most of the material while drawing a bravura performance from Webb. Steve TenEyck handles the lighting and simple, but effective, scenic design, both of which keep our attention firmly focused on Webb's antics. Marci Franklin provides the costume design, while Rusty Wandall contributes another fine sound design.

Buyer & Cellar is an entertaining excursion into the world of celebrity, and since the run has been extended to April 12, 2015, you have absolutely no excuse not to catch this fabulous show. The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis closes their Studio Theatre season with a real winner!

Jonathan Tolins is a very clever writer. Jeremy Webb is a very smart actor. Put them together, with some inventive guidance from director Wendy Dann, and you get a quite enjoyable ninety minutes or so in the Studio Theatre at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis.

Playwright Tolins was fascinated by the big picture book Barbra Streisand published, filled with photos of her mansion. Tolins was particularly intrigued by the intimate shopping mall she had created in her basement. Here she keeps what she has collected over the years – costumes from shows, jewelry, dolls – carefully displayed in a series of small shops.

Tolins then fantasized that Streisand hired someone to staff the shops, to be there in case she decided to go down and browse the merchandise. He turned the fantasy into a one-person play and called it “Buyer and Cellar.”

The play is about an LA actor who takes the job as the clerk in Streisand's mall shops. Jeremy Webb plays that actor.

But first – and here I assume he is speaking to us as Jeremy Webb – he makes very clear to us that only two things we will be told are real. One is Streisand's book of photos, which he has with him and shows us. The other is the basement mall. It really exists.

Everything else spins out of the imagination of playwright Tolins and is given sparkling life by actor Webb, who having made all this clear, immediately becomes actor Alex More.

And More does what I usually dislike about one-person shows. He tells us about his adventures in the basement. We aren't experiencing a virtual present, as in most drama. We're listening to a narrative about the past. However, playwright Tolins has given him such great material to narrate and actor Webb handles it so well, I was quite happy to listen to Alex More tell his story.

It has suspense. Will he get the job? Will Babs come visit? How will he respond to her? Is this a real friendship that is developing, as it seems to be at times? And how is the playwright going to wind this up?

Along the way we have lots of fun with the inside jokes about Streisand and show business and LA and pop culture and being gay and being Jewish and not being Jewish. Tolins' writing is witty. Webb handles it with precise timing and inflections. Subtle physical moves and vocal rhythms make the difference when he brings in another character – his lover, the head of Streisand's household, Streisand herself. It's not quite an impersonation of Streisand. It's a suggestion, a sketch, in the way he holds his arms, turns his head, in the remnants of Brooklyn in her speech.

And if you want to dig a little deeper, you can wonder about talent like Streisand's and what it and the celebrity that comes with it do to a person. As someone tells her when she considers doing “Gypsy,” she'd be perfect for it, because Mama Rose is a monster and Streisand is a monster. Is she? Was she always? Did we create it? Was it worth it for the pleasure she brings us? Old questions perhaps, not bothered with enough to interfere with our pleasure during the performance. We can think about it later.

Steve TenEyck's set has useful levels and a bland design – from Streisand's book? Marci Franklin did Webb's costume and Rusty Wandall the sound and original music.

And “Buyer and Cellar” is good story-telling.

By turns sweet, affecting and uproariously funny, Jonathan Tolins' "Buyer & Cellar," a one-man show starring Jeremy Webb, may be one of the most memorable Jewish-themed plays ever. Then again, consider the source material: The play was inspired by Barbra Streisand's humongous coffee table book "My Passion for Design," a comprehensive catalogue of thousands of items of memorabilia accumulated through her six decades as the quintessential American-Jewish entertainer.

The audacious concept of "Buyer & Cellar" envisions a vast underground mall in which Streisand stores her treasure trove of dresses from her movies and plays, *tchochkes* she has picked up impulsively on her worldwide travels, expensive jewelry and a doll collection so vast that it might have made Barbie blush with envy.

Webb plays Alex More, an underemployed Los Angeles actor who finds work as curator of the underground collection. It's a fascinating yet spooky job, with the tomblike silence of the space only relieved by the whirring of a frozen yogurt churn and popcorn maker.

Alex must keep company with himself at first, but then has the dreamlike experience of interacting with Barbra in all of her neurotic, compulsive, perfectionist and ingenious incarnations.

The play is extra noteworthy because it avoids campy satires of Streisand. Webb's Alex, in a prefatory sequence, makes it clear that he does not "do" Streisand — he doesn't don wigs or appear in drag. Alex's respect for Streisand is as sincere as that of Linda Richman, the Mike Myers character on "Saturday Night Live" who unconditionally adores the superstar and whose voice sounds like "buttah" whenever she sings.

Far from being a spoof of Streisand, "Buyer & Cellar" is an homage to the enduring contributions to show business — and to the specifically Jewish role in that business — for which Streisand is solely responsible.

Among the many monologues Alex shares with the audience in this 90-minute play, which is performed without intermission, is one in which he makes it clear that Barbra, despite all of her successes, has always remained the poor, homely Jewish girl whose stepfather would not let her have ice cream because he said she was "too ugly." Nonetheless, she adamantly refused to change either her birth name or her birth nose, telling people who objected to a Jewish performer that they did not have to patronize her recordings, concerts, films or Broadway musicals.

In addition to his interactions with Streisand, Alex also plays his offstage Jewish boyfriend, Barry, whose curiosity about Streisand moves toward jealousy of Alex's attraction to her, as well as Streisand's real-life husband, James Brolin, and her housekeeper.

If you are a Streisand fan (and who among us isn't?) "Buyer & Cellar" is a double treat. Not only is the play itself highly amusing and satisfying, it also contains enough Streisand trivia to satisfy an entire season of questions on "Jeopardy."

Alex reminds us, in excruciatingly hilarious detail, that Lauren Bacall played Streisand's mother in "The Mirror Has Two Faces" and that Karl Malden played her father in "Nuts." References also are sprinkled in to "The Way We Were," "Yentl," "Funny Girl" and "The Prince of Tides," to name just a few.

"Buyer & Cellar" is like a multicourse meal that you don't want to end. Playwright Tolins deserves praise for bringing this thoroughly original concept to the theater, Webb nails an incredibly demanding role, and director Wendy Dann makes it memorable by keeping the action moving at a rapid-fire pace.

What a terrific way for the Rep to conclude its 2014-2015 Studio Series.

Before Jonathan Tolins' *Buyer & Cellar* can actually start, the sole actor (Jeremy Webb, directed by Wendy Dann) issues a reminder that everything he's about to relate is fictitious. At first blush this seems unnecessary — you bought your tickets knowing this is a play, after all — but it's more than legalese. "Everything is fictitious" is the leitmotif of this funny and frothy play, in which Barbra Streisand hires actor Alex More to maintain the shops she's had built in her Malibu basement.

Surprisingly, that last bit is in fact true. Streisand is a bit of a collector, and she does house her ever-expanding collection in a series of shops patterned after a nineteenth-century version of a main street. Barbra disclosed all this in her 2010 coffee-table book, *My Passion for Design*. She does not, however, stash a shopkeeper down there. Life is stranger than fiction when you're incredibly wealthy, but not that strange.

Alex More's journey into this netherworld of costumes and assumed identities begins shortly after he's fired from Disney World — another realm of make-believe — and a former make-out partner gets him an interview with Ms. Streisand's people. In short order he finds himself in a white shirt, sleeve garters and leather apron in Barbra's basement, hoping to encounter his enigmatic employer.

Webb tells us at the onset that he won't impersonate Barbra, but he does affect a slight Brooklyn accent, a nasal voice and a persistent head tilt that strongly implies her character. (His James Brolin is a masterclass in squinting for intensity.) He makes the switch smoothly, even when the pair argue, but it is Webb's charisma that does much of the work. After Barbra says something outrageous, he pops his eyes and laughs with us as if he can't believe she said it either. Performing against a white screen that changes color throughout the show — his only props a small desk, a chair and a water bottle — Webb nonetheless creates the illusion that we're right there with him in that subterranean shopping mall.

Their first meeting is an improvised transaction over a mechanical doll, for which Alex creates a tragic WWII back-story. By the end of this encounter it's clear that both of them are delighted by the game; Alex gets to play make-believe, and Barbra gets to pretend to be someone who is not Barbra Streisand. Alex's ability to make her feel like someone else brings them closer the more they play together in the basement.

But is theirs a real relationship? Alex's boyfriend Barry thinks Barbra's merely playing with him, another toy in the collection, and that Barbra needs to get over her unhappy childhood and get on with her life. More worrisome, Barry believes that Alex is buying into her "poor little rich girl" fantasy.

Is he? In a rare moment of introspection, Alex divulges that his family claims they're descended from Thomas More, who popularized the idea of the *Utopia* in the sixteenth century. "Every person wants to create that dreamworld," Alex argues. Is there any real harm in wanting a better world? By this point Alex and Barbra are deeply invested in the fiction of the basement, where it's just the two of them — and one of them pays the other to be there.

Buyer & Cellar makes fantasy the more appealing choice than reality. Who doesn't dream of being incalculably wealthy and living out your dream of rehearsing a new version of *Gypsy* in a lavish estate? It turns out Barbra doesn't. And there is utopia's fatal flaw — everybody has to buy in or the dream rots from the inside. What elevates *Buyer & Cellar* above being just a clever bit of comic relief is the realization that hits after it's all over: Somewhere in Malibu, Barbra Streisand remains committed to the perfectly designed utopia — one that is empty, save for her.

Jonathan Tolins' tasty one-man play, "Buyer and Cellar", uses Barbra Streisand's 2010 vanity project coffee-table book, "My Passion for Design", as a jumping off point for the story of Alex, a gay, out of work actor in Los Angeles, and his stint as the sole employee in the underground mall at Ms. Streisand's Malibu estate. Alex, pitch-perfectly played by Jeremy Webb, makes it clear from the beginning that this tale is fictional, though the book itself, along with the basement thoroughfare of shops, is real, which makes this 90-minute gallivant even more delicious. Extra points if you have more than a passing knowledge of Barbra Streisand -- singer, actor, director, producer, diva, and gay icon.

After being unceremoniously booted from his job at Disneyland's "Toontown", Alex lands a job manning Streisand's basement street of shops, where she keeps a lifetime of accumulated knick-knacks.

Though he's relegated to the cellar with only old costumes, dolls, immaculately placed bric-a-brac, and a frozen yogurt machine for company, Alex is euphoric about the gig and happy for the steady paycheck. Then, like a bolt from the blue, the day arrives when he's visited by the mall's only patron, Babs herself, who's come down to admire her belongings, engage in light conversation, and haggle for goods she already owns. As Streisand's subterranean visits become more frequent and Alex's relationship with her evolves, Alex's boyfriend becomes more and more annoyed, and perhaps a little jealous, and warns him about flying too close to the sun. Alex is bound to get burned.

While Tolins' play jabs and pokes fun at the more publicly assumed notions about Streisand's persona, it affectionately yields more weight that its clever but featherweight premise seems to offer on the surface. With buoyant direction by Wendy Dann, Webb, with nothing more onstage than a chair and a desk, sucks you in from the start with an affable ease, and his interactions with Streisand are characterized convincingly with a refreshing lack of overdone caricature. He also plays Alex's snarky screenwriter boyfriend, Barry, a chilly fellow employee at the estate, Sharon, with even a little James Brolin thrown in -- all distinctive and well-played. Steve TenEyck's lighting design changes with the text and tone, sometimes with just the snap of a finger, and Rusty Wandall complements the action with subtle, perfectly placed sound design and original music.

No doubt Ms. Streisand has probably never seen this show in person. Oh well. Her loss. This play is great fun. "Buyer and Cellar" closes out the Rep's Studio season, and has already been extended until April 5th. Check it out!

This is a small town to be gay in. In fact, it's quite possible that your most fabulous friends will have all flown the coop this weekend: for the first taste of springtime in Chicago, or to SoBe for the last cool nights of winter. So, what better time to bring in the hilarious "man's man" in the one-man show about the secret life of Barbra Streisand?

Jeremy Webb is full of fabulosity (and charm, and even pain and sorrow) as he spins a tale of celebrity behind the scenes. He primarily plays Alex Moore, an out of work actor in Los Angeles. And perhaps inevitably, when an odd sounding job offer comes along, taking him behind the gates at the singer's Malibu reserve, Miss Streisand gradually takes over his entire life. It's all billed as a totally fictional tale—but somehow a firm denial of factuality only seems to add to the gleeful verisimilitude.

Wendy Dann directs the 90-minute show from 2013, written by Jonathan Tolins. And with his director's help, Mr. Webb fills the stage with a most unusual tale. Among other roles, he plays the wary megastar (though, as he freely admits, it's just an approximation), despite the fact that her true existence seems to be hidden away inside a series of nesting dolls, including the literal false front of a Connecticut-style barn. And that charming structure conceals an underground storage area designed to look like a quaint series of shops ...

It turns out that all these little make-believe retail outlets are a kind of shopper-tainment version of the museum of Streisand's own life: warehousing her old clothes and curiosities, along with a little storefront "selling" frozen yogurt, and more. And each time she goes down to take visit with him, she also gains the very human thrill of the hunt, just like any shopper would at a public mall. Oh! And the memories: not unlike the corners of her mind ...

It all may remind you of the big inventory scene at the end of *Citizen Kane*, hidden under that big red barn. But most of the other disguising layers in this fast and funny confabulation are a bit more ephemeral. Miss Streisand is presented as prickly, mildly conniving, occasionally self-pitying, and conveniently unaware of the grandiose bubble she's made for herself. And Alex, waiting patiently for his one and only customer in the "shops," is ready and willing to be swallowed up as well.

There's always the terrible dread of some mega-tantrum, as she tentatively interacts with him, here and there. But he proves to be a very good match for this particular imagining of the reclusive diva.

Fortunately (or not), Alex also happens to have a boyfriend who's an expert Barbraologist: a former Brooklynite, and something of a Hollywood insider himself. As embodied by Mr. Webb, Barry may not subscribe to "Barbra Quarterly" (the ultimate fanzine of her followers), but his own life has prepared him to read the star herself, just like that, with one eye closed in dark of night. He gives us a trenchant counterpoint to everything Babs says in the play, and also to what her films have said about her, in a dazzling meta-commentary on celebrity.

Of course it all has to come crashing down sooner or later—Alex is too yearning, and Miss Streisand, well, far too self-centered. But it sure is a lot of fun as the veil is lifted, inch by inch, along the way.

Inspired by Miss Streisand's book "My Passion for Design," Off-Broadway's 2013 award winning *Buyer & Cellar* runs through April 5, 2015, downstairs in the Rep's studio theatre: 130 Edgar Road, on the campus of Webster University. For more information visit www.repstl.org.

Alex More is an actor based in Hollywood. More specifically, he's an under-employed actor in need of work. Lo and behold, he hears about a job that sounds weird, wacky and definitely different: Barbra Streisand is looking for someone to be the caretaker for her personal collection of clothes, curios and curiosities.

What's bizarre is that Babs keeps these items in the spacious basement of her lavish California manse, and said cellar is laid out like an avenue lined with specialty shops. Alex's boyfriend, a screenwriter with about as much success as Alex, is envious because he's a huge fan of Ms. Streisand.

When Alex arrives at his new place of employment, he's met by Barbra's no-nonsense assistant, who informs him that he is to dutifully maintain the basement shoppes even if no one actually visits them. He's told that his only customer may be the home-owner herself, who has a penchant for periodically browsing through the merchandise, acting every bit the customer in search of a bargain.

Barbra does indeed eventually appear on the scene, and thus begins a most unusual relationship. Alex is reminded that "the customer is always right," but even in such unique circumstances?

Playwright Jonathan Tolins was inspired to write this quirky, appealing, one-act comedy when he perused Streisand's book, *My Passion for Design*, which the author points out features primary photography by herself. Tolins wondered what might happen if an unemployed actor became the overseer of Barbra's collections in the unique setting of her own basement lavishly laid out like a street of shops.

The result is 90 minutes filled with rollicking laughter and more than a few moments of poignancy as Jeremy Webb pours his heart and soul into a tender, touching portrayal of one man's own passions and perseverance in his craft and in his own bit of fandom for the rich, famous and eccentric.

Webb welcomes us to Alex's world in a disarming introduction, sitting in a chair and facing the audience as he prepares us for a journey that is entirely fictional and yet becomes as comfortable as the relationship that develops between the legendary star and an admirer who brings his own credentials, including talent and enthusiasm, to the situation.

His portrayal of the fictional actor Alex is touching as well as exhausting, to the point that his jacket was wet with perspiration at the media-night performance under Steve TenEyck's penetrating lighting.

TenEyck also designed the mod set that features a back wall of open partitions alternately lit with different hues to accentuate sundry scenes, and a few pieces of comfortable furniture in front. Marci Franklin's costume design dresses Alex as one might expect a contemporary young actor in LA to appear, while Rusty Wandall adds some amusing sound design and original music to complete the setting.

Tolins' script gets carried away after a while, resulting in sensory overload for an audience member trying to keep up with the running litany of pop references, as clever as they are. Webb deftly handles the script by adopting accents to portray various characters, including the stiff assistant, the exasperated boyfriend, Streisand's husband James Brolin and, of course, the grand dame herself. He manages all of it with panache and precarious precision.

Director Wendy Dann moves her lone performer effectively around the set, whether he's addressing the audience or engaged in banter between Alex and his unseen collaborators. It's all done in witty, merry fashion that nonetheless finds room and time for equally affecting moments.

The Rep already has announced that strong advance sales have extended the run of *Buyer & Cellar* through April 5. Do yourself a favor and browse Barbra's bizarre basement with the affable and entertaining Mr. Webb as the unflappable Alex More.

Buyer & Cellar
Reviewed by Harry Hamm
KMOX-AM

03/16/15

Jeremy Webb plays Alex More, an idealistic, animated, unemployed actor who lands the world's most unconventional work opportunity in The Rep's Studio Theater production, "Buyer and Cellar." It is said in the script that it is totally fictitious, but it is founded on some facts that leave the impression it may be a more real story than noted.

The show is done in one act with a static set that has effective, rapid lighting design transitions that propel (along with sound effects) the many situational and character shifts. As the production begins, the character of Alex More introduces himself to the audience and displays a coffee table book Barbra Streisand wrote in 2010 entitled "My Passion For Design." Alex is getting to know the audience in a very personable and humorous way at this point. Through his character, Webb establishes an almost immediate bond of trust and affability.

There are six characters in the show. Webb plays all of them. The storyline involves his landing a job as a kind of caretaker/sales person in a small, make-believe shopping center in the lower level of Streisand's home. Eventually, this leads, of course, to meeting and even establishing a kind of relationship with the fabulous Barbra. We also get to know More and his personal life better.

"Buyer and Cellar" is a magnificently challenging show for Webb, and he plunges into it fearlessly and with great comic ability, plus effective personal and emotional moments. The very intimate confines of the Studio Theater are ideal. You will laugh out loud, a lot. You will feel surprising moments of intimacy. Most of all, you will be totally won over by this bubbly story and its bumbling leading man. Streisand may have a store in her basement. The Rep has a jewel, called The Studio Theater.



Jeremy Webb is Alex in "Buyer & Cellar" at The Rep's Studio Theatre. Inspired by Barbra Streisand's coffee table design book about her Malibu home, the one-man show is a very funny what-if scenario.

JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. — The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis

- "Buyer and Cellar"

Who: The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis

Where: Emerson Studio Theatre at the Loretto-Hilton Center, 130 Edgar Road in Webster Groves

When: Now through through April 5

Tickets: 314-968-4925; www.repstl.org

For Barbra Streisand fans who revel in misty water-colored memories, the one-man comedy "Buyer and Cellar" will light the corners of your mind. Most of all, it's the laughter I'll remember in The Rep's intimate Studio opening night, as we glimpsed the superstar's opulent yet unreal world.

Playwright Jonathan Tolins' erudite discourse on celebrity culture gives us a fly-on-the-wall perspective, albeit a fictional one, into Babs' very guarded lifestyle. To fully appreciate the dishy gossip, acerbic wit and clever dissection of La Streisand's' career oeuvre, you must be aware of her music and movies — at least some of the hits.

A nimble Jeremy Webb is engaging as Alex Moore, an under-employed actor hired for a very odd job. Desperate for income, he treks to the Oscar-Emmy-Grammy-Tony winner's stunning sanctuary in Malibu, and his

nonchalant attitude dissipates, star-struck once surrounded by her favorite things. Warm and exuberant, Webb masterfully turns this challenging, intricate role into a fun romp.

Stationed in a basement replica mall, which houses the singer-actress's massive collection of mementos and possessions, Alex becomes an apron-wearing "Mr. Hooper" in an artificial, solitary environment. After a pleasant encounter with his enigmatic employer, he then becomes somewhat of a confidante and sounding board to one of our biggest entertainment legends.

Webb tells the audience straight up that he doesn't do impressions, that he is no drag queen, but he actually is quite convincing portraying four other distinct characters. Through the fast-paced 90-minute tell-all, he imitated the vocal cadences of the imperious head of the household staff, the Lady of the House, and her husband James Brolin, as well as his snarky boyfriend Barry.

The appealing Webb effectively created an indelible Streisand, softer, with a hint of the Brooklyn accent and her flamboyant personality affectations intact, switching from sympathetic to haughty in a jiffy.

Wendy Dann gracefully directed this breezy showbiz confection, which elevates conspicuous consumption as an art form, but does not skirt the distasteful trappings of fame. The technical aspects are sharp, particularly a limber lighting design by Steve Teneyck, who also fashioned the sleek scenic design. Rusty Wandall wrote a wistful original music score in addition to crafting a superb sound design.

This very funny work was inspired by Streisand's coffee table book, "My Passion for Design," published in 2010, which features many beautiful photos of her New England farmhouse spread. While she mentioned that a street of shops caught her fancy as a unique means to store items, we don't know if she followed through. Yet, the playwright's vivid what-if scenario successfully colors Barbra for us. Webb, as the purveyor of such extravagance, fills in many blanks.

We show-tune lovin' drama queens want to believe it really happened, but even without verification, this play is audacious, name-drops in a delectable way, and we shriek in recognition.

Winner of a 2013 Drama Desk Award, the show was also named Best Unique Theatrical Experience by the Off-Broadway Alliance. It's a fantasy, not unlike La-La Land's dream machine, that we can get lost in quite easily. "Buyer and Cellar" is a delectable hybrid of People magazine, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," and an Imaginary Housewife of Los Angeles. as told by your hilarious gay friend.

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'Buyer and Cellar' bubbles with charm



MARCH 15, 2015 1:32 PM • BY JUDITH NEWMARK

Alex Moore is a friend you'd like to have.

Clever and self-effacing, he would be a lot of fun to have over, or just to chat with for an hour on the phone.

But Alex Moore can't be your friend, because Barbra Streisand got there first.

Jeremy Webb — who plays Alex and everybody else in "Buyer and Cellar," the one-man show that closes the Studio Theatre season at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis — has charm to spare. Probably that's why the Rep extended the show before it even opened. Word gets around.

From his killer smile to his deferential shrugs, Webb knows how to flirt with his audience. His portrayal of Alex, of Streisand, of Alex's boyfriend Barry and the other characters in the comedy woo us from start to finish (only 90 minutes later!). You want to spend time with every one of them.

Inspired by Streisand's goofy coffee-table book "My Passion for Design," in which she details her

elaborate efforts to make her Malibu house into the stage set of her dreams, playwright Jonathan Tolins imagines that a sporadically-employed actor, Alex, has been hired to run the old-fashioned shops that line Streisand's basement. (The underground mall is real; Alex isn't.)

Streisand evidently has poured herself into the creation of an early-American fantasia of which she, owner and sole patron, is the star. That may not appeal to anyone who thinks the whole project sounds crazy, but Tolins lets us understand why Alex might see things differently. At the very least, it's not the worst job he's ever had.

With a clever script that takes on celebrity, Jewish-American culture and the challenge of temptations both financial and personal, Tolins smooths a path for his solitary performer to cruise. And Webb, under the direction of Wendy Dann, seizes the opportunity.

He's a treat as Alex, the most "normal" character in the show. But he's just as effective as Streisand. Though "Buyer and Cellar" isn't drag and doesn't involve impersonations of the star, Webb plays her persuasively.

He really shines when Alex and Babs converse; it's never confusing, even though one actor plays both parts. And a moment when Barbra, distressed, opens her fist to flutter her fingers at Alex is as pungent as a portrait, and just as recognizable.

In one key scene, Streisand's housekeeper explains to Alex that he must wear an old-fashioned outfit in the mall to make the shops "feel real. Truth is very important to her." Of course, truth is precisely what the ersatz "shoppes" — catering to a rich woman who gets her kicks bargaining to "buy" things she already owns — doesn't stock. Alex's gradual recognition of his own need for honesty gives "Buyer and Cellar" more substance than such a slight, terrifically entertaining show promises at first blush.

"Buyer and Cellar"

When • Through April 5

Where • Emerson Studio Theatre, Loretto-Hilton Center, 130 Edgar Road

How much • \$50-\$65

More info • 314-968-4925; repstl.org

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March 15, 2015

Buyer & Cellar

Sometimes the soul cries out for an evening of art that isn't Socially Significant. Laughter promotes endorphin release, like another activity we won't go into here, and it's good for your immune system. One walks out of "Buyer & Seller" at the Rep Studio considerably healthier than one walked in. The only bad news is that tickets aren't covered by your health insurance.

About the sole requirement for enjoyment is that the viewer know who Barbra Streisand is. The play is a fantasy, someone's daydream of what working for her would be like, the whole thing spurred by Streisand's book about her home. Jeremy Webb plays Alex More, an unemployed actor who gets a job at an estate in Malibu working in the cellar of the barn. Not just any barn, of course, and not just any cellar - this cellar has been turned into an arcade of shops to hold Streisand's multitudinous purchases, so she can stroll through, chose what she likes and use it or return it the next day presumably after fondling it a while. The popcorn machine and frozen yogurt machines are also down there, for good measure. We know our hero will meet The Lady Of The House, as she's referred to in his interview, sooner or later.

Our hero announces straightaway he's not going to impersonate Streisand. But of course he does, as well as inhabiting four other characters, morphing back and forth at warp speed but leaving room for the cracking wise we'd expect from these Hollywood types. He's having fun with this - or at least seems to be - while working like mad. Director Wendy Dann has paced things well and Jonathan Tolins' script only sags when Alex' boredom is called forth, just as it should.

A short, brisk piece of work with no intermission, it's as bracing as a double espresso and as relaxing as having it with a pal. They've already extended the run by two weeks, so I'm not the only one who thinks so.

Buyer & Cellar

through March 29

Studio Theatre

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