

BOOKS

Detroit native releases memoir on writing for 'The Golden Girls,' 'Roseanne' and 'Gilmore Girls'

Erica Hobbs Special to The Detroit News

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Fans of “The Golden Girls,” “Roseanne” and “Gilmore Girls” might want to thank two particular Michigan “Golden” girls for their favorite TV shows. Judith Golden, who was a second-grade teacher at Southfield’s former John F. Kennedy Elementary School, encouraged her young student Stan Zimmerman to pursue his passion for theater after allowing him to perform one of his plays in her class. She then called his mother, Susanne Zimmerman — whom he would later include among his “Golden Girls” — to recommend she send him to the Cranbrook Theatre School summer camp in Bloomfield Hills, where he got his first theatrical training.

“Thank God she called...” he said. “That changed my life.”

Zimmerman, who was born in Detroit and raised in Southfield in the '70s, would go on to a successful Hollywood career writing for hit TV shows, which he recalls in his new memoir “The Girls: From Golden to Gilmore” (Indigo River Publishing) released last month.

“It’s a book about a person who always loved theater and television, and his arc from being a shy kid to being who he became and working on all these great shows,” said Novi resident Adrienne Gornstein, who has been friends with Zimmerman since childhood.

The book spans his life from his youth to present day, sharing his path to success, the tribulations of showbusiness and behind-the-scenes stories of working in Hollywood. He also discusses his friendships and encounters with some of Hollywood's biggest stars, including his leading ladies, plus fellow Michigan natives like Sandra Bernhard, Madonna, Diana Ross and Lily Tomlin.

“[With the book], I was just fascinated by all the wonderful people, and women especially, who had influenced me,” he said.

While working on “The Golden Girls,” Zimmerman recalls his friendship with Estelle Getty, who played Sophia. As a gay man in the 1980s, he had to keep his sexual orientation a secret, but Getty understood right away and became a close ally and protector.

On “Roseanne,” Zimmerman describes the show's toxic environment and difficulty in working with the title star, who required the writing staff to wear numbered T-shirts so she wouldn't have to learn their names.

With “Gilmore Girls,” Zimmerman recalls the series' grueling working environment and friendship with its star Lauren Graham — who portrayed Lorelai — and his later involvement with the show's annual fan festival.

But the book is about more than just his career successes. Before, after and in between his hit shows, he discusses the politics, frequent rejection, failed projects and frustrations of Hollywood, as well as personal challenges, like being bullied as a child.

“[It's about] the ups and downs [of my career], how do you pick yourself up after having just normal career disappointments...,” he said, “and then there's also a lot that's not just about show businesses but just about dealing with losing people and grief.” Three of those painful losses were Michiganders - Grammy Award-winning songwriter Allee Willis, childhood friend Julie Silverman Sachse, and his mother.

“I did not know that losing my mother was going to be the end of my book,” he said, “but that's kind of how it ended and realizing that she was my one true Golden Girl.”

The book talks about going back to his theatrical roots, including writing two plays that have been performed in Metro Detroit in recent years.

In 2019, Royal Oak's Stagecrafters' theater group presented a reading of his play "Yes, Virginia." Set in Bloomfield Hills, the two-person show is about the relationship between an elderly mother and her housekeeper and a friendship that grows beyond their employer/employee relationship. It was inspired by his mother and his family's longtime housekeeper.

"The show has sort of a universal message, no matter where you live, how much money you have or don't have, when you get older, it can be very lonely," said Helen Frizzo, who performed the mother character. "These two women were both lonely, and they found joy together at the end."

In 2021, he worked with a childhood friend, theater producer Amy Nederlander, and her youth leadership program L!FE Leaders to present a reading of "right before I go" at Detroit's Cass Tech High School to raise money for suicide awareness. The play — told through real-life suicide notes, is about what happens to a funny person when something tragic happens in their life, inspired by the loss of Zimmerman's close friend to suicide and his own experience being bullied as a child. The Cass Tech reading starred Michigan actor Hill Harper and featured a video opening from Tomlin.

While "right before I go" is more somber than Zimmerman's more well-known comedy writing, Nederlander said the continuity is his insight into human nature.

"Stan has a very special way of seeing things and cutting right to the truth of it in an accessible way that's warm yet funny," she said. "It's biting, because it's so true."

As a man, Zimmerman credits his ability to write for women to his sensitive nature and his close female relationships, especially with his mother, grandmother and sister. He also credits one of his first acting teachers at Cranbrook, who instructed the class to go to the mall and observe the people around them.

"I've taken that to heart ever since," he said. "It's especially helpful as a writer. My writing partner and I still will go out to lunches and work and will make up conversations that we think other people are saying as we watch them from across the mall."

Though he hasn't lived in Michigan for years, Zimmerman credits his Midwest upbringing and early theater training for the relatability of his work.

"There's a running theme, I think once you're a Michigander, you always are," he said. "I'm proud to be a Detroiter."