

HOLLYWOOD POWERHOUSE SANDY GALLIN SHIFTS HIS TALENTS TO INTERIOR DESIGN

A talent manager for three decades, Gallin is embracing his latest role as designer, planning and renovating homes for the entertainment-industry elite

Text by Ingrid Sischy | Portrait by Douglas Friedman

[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#)

Turn off your cell phones, please. Curtain up! Get ready for a surprising second act. It stars Sandy Gallin, who for more than three decades was the guy you'd go to if you sang like a lark and looked like a million bucks. As one of the premier talent managers and producers in show business, Gallin could pick and choose his clients. His roster included Richard Pryor, Cher, Dolly Parton, Michael Jackson, Whoopi Goldberg, Mariah Carey, Nicole Kidman, Renée Zellweger . . .

Forever, his pals have been a Who's Who of the entertainment world, from Barbra Streisand to Jon Bon Jovi—with the inner circle being the famous quartet of Barry (Diller), David (Geffen), Calvin (Klein), and Sandy. "As soon as I could speak," recalls Gallin, who grew up just outside New York City, "I talked about having millions of dollars, knowing famous people, and becoming a star." Unabashed candidness, it must be said, is one of his irresistible qualities.



In the late 1990s, however, Gallin retired and walked away from all that. Only he didn't, exactly. Instead he has reemerged as a trusted maestro of houses for entertainment-industry titans and their families, including Marilyn and Jeffrey Katzenberg, Jimmy Iovine, Deborah and Allen Grubman, and Shelli and Irving Azoff. Not that any of this was planned. Gallin has never set up a proper design office, and he has no website. I've known him well for about 15 years, and I'm friendly with quite a few people who have hired him to work on their homes. Every one of them I spoke to told me they were initially drawn to the residences he's created for himself. Frequently they ask him to produce a house he'd want to live in.

The full scope of what Gallin does for his clients is ineffable. Interior design doesn't quite cover it. He is part executive producer, part set designer, part decorator, part picker, part psychologist. All of his projects share a key quality. As Klein explains, "Often what even great interior designers do is create a space that isn't as comfortable and warm as what Sandy does, and that is the essence of why people like his work."

Gallin's design business actually began in the early '70s as a hobby, an outlet for the stress of managing the careers of superstars. He started by buying homes, fixing them up, living in them for a while, and, when the time was right, flipping them. One of his earliest projects was a house in Los Angeles's Benedict Canyon that became known as a mecca for some of the best parties in town, thanks to the mix of people he always attracted and the ambience he created. Parton, who has worked with Gallin, lived with him (don't get excited—it's passionate but platonic), and also been his business partner, remembers the first time she visited one of his houses. "I walked in and thought, Oh my God! This is beautiful. It is so well-done. I grew up with no taste, no money, no style, no class, no nothing, so you appreciate those kinds of things. Then through the years I saw Sandy do it again and again. Even though he loved show business—he was the best manager that I and many other people ever had—his greatest gift is what he is doing now."

There's been an evolution to Gallin's design career. For years he took on these projects for himself, slowly gaining a reputation—to the point that owning one of the houses he'd renovated and furnished became a mark of prestige. My favorite funny anecdote is the one about what happened when he was selling a place in Beverly Hills to Frank Sinatra in the '80s. "It was a very glamorous house," says Gallin. "It had a large open living room, bar, den, breakfast room, and dining room—all in one. There was a stairway up to a fabulous master suite, and the outside seating area had a fireplace and a Jacuzzi, with a fantastic view of the city." When the moment came to discuss the final details, the two men sat down. Gallin says Sinatra asked to see his hands. "I showed him my hands, and he said, 'They're nice hands. See that sofa? See those candles? See the books? See the glasses in the bar? If anything in this house is not here when I move in, all those fingers are going to be broken by me.' And then he started laughing—he was obviously totally joking."

In the mid-'90s Gallin met Scott Mitchell, a young architectural designer who was just starting out. Before long the two began working together, and as Gallin has taken on more projects, Mitchell has remained his primary collaborator. In 2002 they teamed up on a new Malibu estate that Gallin lived in and sold a couple of years later to Mark Burnett, creator of the TV show *Survivor*, reportedly for close to \$30 million. By Gallin's account, he has performed his alchemy on nearly 50 houses to date, and with rare exception, he says he's always turned a profit, typically walking away with a few million dollars.

Once you've been in two or three Gallin houses, some signature elements start to become evident: dark-stained floors of salvaged wood; spaces crowded with sumptuous sofas and chairs you want to sink into; paintings and drawings hung in grids; personal objects, photographs, and mementos arranged in bookcases; tabletops covered with candles, objets, and books on art, architecture, design, and fashion; giant jars of tempting jelly beans and pretzels placed on a bar; bathrooms you wish you could move into; indoor and outdoor fireplaces; and idyllic gardens with lush landscaping. The point is never about the provenance of the furniture or the artworks but how everything comes together and elevates a room with a sort of Hollywood-at-home glamour. "Sandy's houses always feel very human," says Donna Karan. "You never feel 'do not touch.' But at the same time there is a *wow!* factor." Or as Kelly Ripa says, "The first time I went to one of his cocktail parties, at a place he owned in the Hamptons, I overheard a woman say, 'This is what God would do if he—or she—had money.' That's pretty much it."

Although Gallin has always been happy to pitch in for free when friends have asked for advice, it's a fairly recent development that clients formally hire him to work on their homes. The first was his pal Jeffrey Katzenberg, who in 2012 enlisted Gallin to design the interiors of his family's residence in the Trousdale Estates section of Beverly Hills. (Gallin is now working on the Katzenbergs' Malibu property.) "From the earliest days I knew Sandy, he was always living in beautiful houses, and he was in a different one every nine months," says the studio chief. "My excitement with our house was about having Sandy, for the first time in his career, build something that wasn't about flipping it. He exceeded our expectations, and I think he exceeded his own, too."

Katzenberg calls the group that collaborated on the house—which also included architect Howard Backen and landscape designer Mark Rios—his "dream team." Word on the street is that Gallin's fee was around \$3 million, a fact he would not confirm, but it is obvious that the Katzenberg project helped bring about a turning point in his career.

And the clients have been lining up ever since, despite Gallin's ostensible lack of credentials. He does not pretend to be a connoisseur and will tell you readily that he never studied architecture or design. "What Sandy has is an eye, and an instinct," says his friend Ross Bleckner, the painter. "He is so agile at creating an environment that I've always thought of

what he does as installation art. He combines things that have different levels and layers of meaning and value. Old things and new things. He loves the search, he loves bringing things together, whether it's a house or people—and it's usually both."

Those talents are clear to anyone lucky enough to attend one of Gallin's memorable parties or dinners, whether at his recent homes in L.A. or in the Hamptons, including his latest place, a turn-of-the-century farmhouse in Amagansett he renovated with Mitchell. As television personality Andy Cohen, a frequent guest of Gallin's, says, "Sandy is this unusual intersection of opulence mixed with 100 percent hospitality and comfort. He'll have thousands of candles lit for a dinner party, and in the bathroom there will be 50 of the fluffiest, whitest towels rolled up perfectly." Another regular, Sarah Jessica Parker, remarks, "There are two conversation topics. One is the people who come—the moguls, the famous, the infamous. And then there's the environment. You know you are in a Sandy Gallin house. They always have a familiarity. The curious thing is that at the end of the night Sandy might have disappeared for hours, but everyone is still happily in his home. He wants it to be that way."

Speaking of great hosts, one of Gallin's latest assignments came from entertainment lawyer Allen Grubman and his wife, Deborah, when they bought the Beverly Hills house of the late Hollywood agent Sue Mengers. Although Mengers's dinner parties were legendary—because of the guests and the conversation, not the food—it was well-known that the home, which was designed by California architect John Elgin Woolf, had seen much better days. Gallin, who was a friend of Mengers's, knew all the pitfalls. "Sue used to call me every four or five years and ask, 'What's that contractor's name again?' " he recalls. "The first time was 27 years ago. She never did a thing with it. Ever."

But the Grubmans loved the place. "Sue Mengers was the iconic Hollywood agent, and her house had an enormous amount of entertainment history," Allen says. "I was drawn to it because of the symbolism of all the wonderful dinners that occurred there—something my wife does brilliantly." Gallin and Mitchell's renovation has brought to the home a glory it perhaps never had, maintaining its architectural integrity while updating it for 21st-century living. Summing up the irresistible appeal of Gallin's work, Allen says, "Walking into one of Sandy's houses, you don't want to visit—you want to move in."

When I asked Gallin toward the end of our interview about homes and interiors in the movies or on television that have inspired him over the years, he didn't hesitate. His immediate reply: the staircase at Tara in *Gone with the Wind*. "I haven't found the client who wants that yet, but I'd be very happy to do it," he says, laughing. He also names the grand estates on *Dynasty*. The Banks family home in the Spencer Tracy–Elizabeth Taylor classic *Father of the Bride* (Gallin was one of the producers of the 1991 remake). Then, after a pause, he deadpans, "I would like to live in Downton Abbey."

I could just picture Lady Grantham sending for him. And the least expected part of all is that Gallin has finally joined his own family's line of work, since his father was a builder. "He would have been shocked to know I am doing this," Gallin says. When I suggest to him that he's still in the entertainment business, pointing to his clients, to the guests at his celebrated dinners, Gallin's eyes get big, and he smiles. "It's when the houses start singing and dancing," he says, "that I know this will be true." Just wait.

Tour a selection of Sandy Gallin-designed homes from Malibu to the Hamptons.

This article was published in the March 2014 issue.

AROUND THE WEB



3 SECRETS OF PEOPLE THAT ALWAYS HAVE A FLAWLESSLY CLEAN HOUSE



35 ITEMS AROUND YOUR HOUSE YOU CAN TRASH RIGHT NOW



SEE JOHNNY DEPP & KATE MOSS' BEAUTIFUL NYC APARTMENT



THE ONE THING THAT MAKES YOUR KITCHEN MODERN

Powered By ZergNet

© 2015 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

USE OF THIS SITE CONSTITUTES ACCEPTANCE OF OUR [USER AGREEMENT](#) (EFFECTIVE 1/2/2014) AND [PRIVACY POLICY](#) (EFFECTIVE 1/2/2014) [YOUR CALIFORNIA PRIVACY RIGHTS](#)

THE MATERIAL ON THIS SITE MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED, DISTRIBUTED, TRANSMITTED, CACHED OR OTHERWISE USED, EXCEPT WITH THE PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION OF CONDÉ NAST.

[AD CHOICES](#)

CONDÉ NAST