



Deliverance in Dachau: Ian McKellen and Michael Cashman PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Michael Billington on Bent's revival at the Lyttelton Carrying the torch

MARTIN Sherman's *Bent* was first seen at the Royal Court on May 3 1979, coinciding with Election Night. Now it reappears at the Lyttelton in a Britain in which many freedoms have been eroded and in which the level of sexual intolerance is once again rising: "Pulpit Pools" screams *The Sun*, while *The Times* magisterially decreed on Friday that "It is not advisable for senior judicial appointments to be offered to practising homosexuals."

In such a climate, the revival of *Bent* takes on an extra importance. Eleven years ago I described it as "a work of considerable dignity and passion". I still feel that its virtue is that, by taking Nazi Germany as its setting, it shows where the vicious persecution of people for their sexuality may ultimately lead. It is not a flawless play, but it is a refreshingly humanist one that argues that homosexuals are "no better, no worse" than anyone else: not a separate species, simply members of the human race.

More than I first realised, the play is also about the moral education of its hero, Max. When we first meet him in 1934 Berlin, he is a well-born hustler who haunts the clubs, deals in coke and lives in an apolitical world. Mr Sherman is critical of a ghettoised gay culture that cuts itself off from political reality: to Rudy, Max's dancer boy-friend, Ernst Rohm is simply a fat queen who runs around with a lot of beautiful boys. And it is Max's own naivete in picking up the lover of

one of the SA top-brass that precipitates the crisis in which he and Rudy are forced to live as outlawed fugitives.

Far from being sentimental, Mr Sherman's play amounts to a constant questioning of Max's desire to survive at all costs. En route to Dachau, he is forced to disown and kill his lover. He makes necrophilic love to a 13-year-old girl in order to be classified not as a homosexual but as a Jew. And, once in Dachau, he bribes the guards to permit his friend, Horst, to join him in the meaningless task of heaving rocks.

But the whole point of the play is that love for Horst transforms Max from a selfish survivor into someone prepared to die for his membership of a persecuted, minority.

It is a subtler play than I first realised. It sanely argues that there is no automatic moral distinction between homosexuals and heterosexuals; but it goes on to suggest that, when homosexuals are discriminated against and punished, they should practise the strongest possible collective defiance.

In the first act, Mr Sherman makes his points with great dramatic effect: there is one particularly good scene on a Cologne park-bench between Max and his roving-eyed uncle who has learned to live a bisexual double life. But, although there is one brilliant passage of purely verbal love-making, the rock-heaving second act becomes repetitious.

In one way, that is the point (the development of human passion through inhuman drudgery) but it takes time to

get to the crunch. In the light of Joshua Sobol's *Ghetto*, I am also inclined to think there is a better case to be made for the survival tactics than Mr Sherman admits.

But it remains a good play partly because it opens up a neglected aspect of the Nazi nightmare and partly because it stresses the political importance of coming out.

Sean Mathias's production, spare and lean, also contains a fine performance from Ian McKellen which charts the distinct stages of Max's moral growth. He moves from being a roguish flirt and vain hustler to a man horrifyingly aware of the cost of survival: McKellen seems to dredge up from the very depths of his soul the phrases describing how he acquired the yellow star. And in the Dachau scenes his hobbling gait and mechanical movement implies that the chosen toll is Max's way of stilling his own conscience.

Michael Cashman as Horst misses some of the flinty stoicism Tom Bell initially brought to the part but handles extremely well the crucial declaration that homosexuals are, first and foremost, people. Paul Rhys as the innocently fey Rudy and Robert Eddison as Max's hypocritical, camel-coated uncle also lend strong support.

A demanding, fascinating play, but the important thing about *Bent* is that it reaches beyond the specialist appeal of gay drama to offer a sane and timely warning about the brutality of sexual intolerance.

Billington on Bent

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