

# Loving men to

## Theatre

**Michael Coveney** applauds a grim but timely revival.

PUBLIC attitudes towards homosexuality, complicated by the tragedy of the Aids epidemic and apparently hostile Government legislation, have taken such a turn for the worse that Martin Sherman's *Bent*, revived for just 30 performances by the National Theatre in the Lyttelton 11 years after its Royal Court premiere, seems a necessary play where once it was merely mawkish and sensational.

Ian McKellen, reinventing his original role of Max, a Berlin homosexual who survives in society, and Dachau, by denying his true nature in public, movingly analogises his own progress from discreet, non-public gay, to dogmatically eloquent 'out gay' campaigner. *Bent*'s rallying cry, however — better to be out and dead than furtive and alive — is both cruel and harsh.

The Nazi persecution of homosexuals, as of Jews, thrived on public statements of vilification, itself a result of the grumbling intolerance to which Section 28 of the Local Government Finance Act in 1988 so scandalously pandered. What are we to make, for instance, of a columnist like George Gale who, in the *Daily Mail* last August, suggested that all homosexuals were likely to spread the disease of Aids and were therefore incipient murderers?

The leap still to be made is the full acknowledgement by a predominantly straight society of such a thing as homosexual love. On the merely visceral level, this is now the challenge of *Bent*, and the audience's response at the performance I attended was of a shattering intensity.

We squirmed in revulsion and disbelief as Max kicked his Berlin boyfriend to death on the Dachau-bound train and then recounted how he violated a dead adolescent girl in order to demonstrate heterosexual virility and save his skin. Max barbers his pink triangle for a yellow star. Jews are given meat in their soup.

With fellow prisoner Horst (Michael Gashman), Max is assigned to the futile, interminable task of hugging heavy stones from one side of the stage to the other. In the rest breaks, still heavily guarded, the couple, standing several feet apart among the rubble, make physical love by auto-erotic suggestion. This is known as getting your rocks off while keeping your socks on, and it constitutes the safest safe-sex routine yet devised under fear of death.

The audience was electrified, and so, too, was Max, who 'comes out' by impaling himself

on the prison wire after openly clasping Horst's corpse, the first time he has embraced the man he loves. The raw, brute force of the message is theatrically irresistible, and McKellen once again pulls off brilliantly the difficult feat of making Max both despicable and pitiable.

But Sherman's writing is still best in the early scenes of domestic cat and mouse between McKellen's promiscuous Max and Paul Rhys's beautifully hurt live-in lover, and in the park bench meeting with Robert Eddison's gravely respectful, impeccably dressed Uncle Freddie, who arranges alibis and travel documents while sneakily eyeing a distant policeman ('We're not allowed to be fluffs anymore'). Direction and design, neat and powerful, are by Sean Mathias and Michael Vale.

Another life, too, for Stephen Jeffreys's *Valued Friends*, revived at Hampstead Theatre a year after its premiere on the same stage, and suddenly a period piece. A fluff of friends in Earl's Court are stretched apart by market forces. Jeffreys has written a real hanger-on of a social comedy, and Sue Plummer's design, the communal clutter of a rented apartment yielding to the chic white classicism of a desirable property, compounds the Chekhovian dimension.

This play which, along with Doug Lacie's double thrust of *Progress* and *Fadlow*, is among the best of the last decade, deserves commercial success; Robin Lefevre's production does not promise any by casting the technically deficient but trendily 'alternative' comedians Josie Lawrence and Jimmy Mulville in the key roles of daffy actress and pop journalist still stuck on *The Searchers*. Louisa Rix and Michael Angelis are gratefully recognisable, though, as rising business-woman and sinking historical economist. Best of all is Martin Chunes, sole survivor from the first production, as a smooth property mogul, oily and slick, advocating routes and boulevards through a jungle of

## Revolution

FOR one night only, Bolek Bolvita treated London to his extraordinary *The Jester and the Queen* as a finishing touch to this year's Mime Festival. Bolek found it easy to amuse his audience but hard to cope with his wife, the Queen. She sat on a rough-hewn, blood-stained throne (the nasty suspicion was that these were the traces of a squashed King) with a scowl that looked massacre-proof. 'Je m'ennuie!' she thundered.

Bolek Polvika, a handsome Czech threatened by limbs that tend to tangle, behaved as though he had found himself a host at a huge party he never intended to throw. He translated

## Coveney on Bent

Clipped By:



ianharris

Mon, Dec 28, 2020