

BENT

: A Review

by Paul Miles and Derek Frost

Directed by Robert Allan Ackerman,
at the New Apollo Theatre, in New
York City.

Theatrically Bent is a superbly crafted piece of work, powerfully directed by Robert Allan Ackerman at the New Apollo Theatre in New York City and exquisitely acted by a cast that includes Richard Gere, David Dukes, and David Marshall Grant.

On a personal level it is the story of one gay man's acceptance of loving and being loved and of his own gayness. On a historical level, it tells us of the oppression and extermination of gay people in Nazi Germany, a historical chapter largely ignored by most history books. On a political level it addresses the potential for fascism in any society and how gay people fit into that picture.

Bent is the story of Max and Rudy, politically naive lovers caught in the web of Nazi persecution of gays. Rudy, a gentle child-man, is battered on the way to Dachau.

But Max, the picaresque survivor, manages not only to arrive alive at the death-camp but to get the yellow star that identifies prisoners as Jews, rather than the pink triangle reserved for homosexuals. This way, he believes, he will survive by escaping the special hatred of the Nazis for the "bent."

At Dachau, Max is befriended by Horst, a thin, ghostly prisoner who first came to the camps as a result of his involvement in the early gay rights movement. Together they haul rocks from one pile to another and back again, a meaningless and exhaustive labor designed to destroy the minds of the prisoners.

In the play's most extraordinary scene, Max and Horst contrive to make love without touching, while standing at attention under the eyes of the guards. This victory gives them strength, but even that is not enough to overcome the effects of the grueling physical abuse of Dachau.

Horst falls victim to pneumonia, and, for once, Max the wheeler-dealer cannot help. Max believes that he has "tricked" a guard into getting him medicine. But the guards know as they always do.

Horst is faced with the deadly hat-throwing game, in which the prisoner is ordered to throw his cap onto the electrified fence and then to retrieve it. Obedience means electrocution; refusal means being shot.

Max must fling Horst's body into a pit. He removes his yellow star, replaces it with Horst's bloodstained pink triangle, and hurls himself onto the fence.

One of the main themes throughout the play is that Max has trouble with freely being able to love and accepting the idea of loving. For instance, while begging his uncle to acquire two tickets out of Germany, one for Max and one for Rudy, the uncle asks Max if he is in love with Rudy. Max replies, "Don't be stupid. What's love? . . . I'm a grown-up now."

Through his relationship with Horst in the prison camp, Max eventually comes to realize he can love, and does love Horst, but only after much struggle with himself.

Horst is a man who is able to love, who gives his love freely to Max. They verbally make love together, during a standing-at-attention rest period, unable to touch or look at one another.

Max nonetheless continues to deny he loves Horst; he tells him, "Queers aren't meant to love. . . they (society) don't want us to . . . I know. Don't love me."

In a second verbal love-making scene, Horst "pulls back" when Max begins to get rough.

Horst replies, "You try to hurt me . . . why can't you be gentle? . . . on the outside (before concentration camp days) people made pain and called it love. And it was exciting, but it wasn't love."

Max begins to remember that Rudy didn't like the pain either, and he isn't sure anymore that even he did. Then Max begins--unsurely at first--to make love to Horst, again verbally, but this time "gently, softly."

It is then that Max begins to understand he is able to love.

(Bent, cont. p. 12)