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STUDY GUIDE



BENT
BY MARTIN SHERMAN

Performance Works, Granville Island 2007

Bent by Martin Sherman - A Brief Study Guide

About the Playwright	Gillian Lockitch
Synopsis of <i>Bent</i>	Amanda Lockitch
Production History	Gillian Lockitch
<i>Bent</i> : Martin Sherman's Vision of Gay History and Gay Liberation in the Shadow of the Holocaust	Errol Durbach
Selected Dates	Amanda Lockitch
Paragraph 175	Amanda Lockitch

About the Playwright

Martin Sherman was born in Philadelphia in 1938 and educated at Boston University College of Fine Arts, receiving a BFA Drama in 1960. From 1976-77 he was resident playwright at Playwrights Horizons in New York. He moved to London in 1980.

Sherman won the Dramatists Guild's Hull-Warriner Award for *Bent*, his best known work. He wrote the screenplay for the 1996 film adaptation which won The International Critics Award at The Cannes Film Festival.

In an interview with Brandon Judell, lead film critic for Critics Inc. on America Online, Sherman and Sean Mathias (director of the 1997 film version of *Bent*) were asked whether there was a factual basis for the mind games played by the Nazis in the concentration camp. Sherman replied that the film takes place very early on in a detention camp, before the camps became extermination camps, and that people could even be released some times. He commented that all that information and the mind games are based directly on Bruno Bettelheim's book "The Informed Heart." He said that reading that book educated him as to what went on in those days and in those camps, and what the Nazis did. Bruno Bettelheim himself was released after two years from such a camp.

Although best known for *Bent*, Sherman is a prolific and eclectic playwright. His other plays include *Next Year in Jerusalem*, *The Night Before Paris*, *Passing By*, *Cracks*, *Rio Grande*, *Messiah* (the story of a young

girl who follows a false prophet) and *When She Danced* (a comedy about Isadora Duncan). More recently, *Rose* tells the story of twentieth century Jewish life from the perspective of an 80 year old woman living in Florida, who began life in a Ukrainian Shtetl.

Synopsis

1934, Berlin. Max and Rudy's apartment, mid afternoon. Max is bruised and recovering from a night of bacchanalian entertainment. Rudy is petulant that Max has brought home another man after the festivities the night before. This man, Wolf, turns out to be a Nazi Storm Trooper (SA) who is on a wanted list. As Max tries to persuade Wolf to lend him rent money, there is a knock at the door. Rudy and Max assume it is their landlord, Rosen; however it is two SS men coming for Wolf. Max and Rudy flee while Wolf is under attack from the two soldiers.

Later that day they arrive at Greta's club. Greta, a heterosexual male who performs as a woman, sings "Streets of Berlin". Max and Rudy hide in her dressing room replacing their bathrobes with any clothing they can find. Greta finishes her song and discovers them in her room. She tells them that they must leave Berlin, that many of the SA leaders were murdered on Hitler's command the night before (during the Night of the Long Knives), and that Wolf was on the list. Greta admits that she showed the SS where to find Wolf.

Two years later, Max meets his uncle Freddie in a park in Cologne. Max has been trying to get train tickets and passports for two years to get himself and Rudy to safety. Uncle Freddie can only provide one ticket. Max refuses to leave Rudy behind in such danger and therefore does not take the ticket. Uncle Freddie is unable to help him any further as the family has had enough of Max's irresponsible lifestyle.

Max returns to Rudy in the forest outside Cologne where they are living in a colony of tents. They argue about how to get out of their situation but eventually find their way to dreaming of a better life. Just as they make up from the fight, they are found and placed under arrest.

On the train to Dachau concentration camp, Rudy is taken away because he wears horn rimmed glasses, signifying him as one of the "intelligentsia". Horst, a fellow prisoner on the train explains to Max that Rudy can no longer exist to Max if he wants to keep himself alive. Horst is wearing a prison uniform

with a pink triangle which he explains to Max means that he is queer. It is deemed the lowest because the other prisoners treat them poorly because they think they cannot fight back. Rudy is brought back by the guards and they beat him in front of Max. Eventually Max is made to participate and he ends up killing Rudy.

A few days later Max and Horst are in Dachau. Max has worked a deal with the SS to be given a "yellow star" demarcating him as Jewish rather than wearing the "pink triangle" of the homosexuals. Horst convinces Max to tell him what the deal was as Max is clearly unsettled. Max tells Horst the devastating story of what he was forced to do on the train and the play reaches the end of act one.

The second half of the play takes place at the rock pile in Dachau. Max has worked another deal to get Horst to work in the same area. Horst is so upset that he was included in one of Max's deals that he does not speak to him for three days. Eventually they end up conversing once again. In fact, they bring themselves to orgasm through dialogue because they are unable to look at each other or to touch. Horst soon declares his love for Max which Max vehemently fights against stating that "queers aren't meant to love". Horst shows Max his secret code that means "I love you"; a gesture that he can make without anyone knowing, he can even do it in front of the guards. A few months later the weather is starting to turn. Horst and Max have long since been split into separate barracks, Horst is with all the men with pink triangles, more and more homosexuals are being arrested. Max is in all Jewish barracks. In fact, he has seen his old landlord from Berlin. Horst is not eating or sleeping and his fingers are frostbitten. He gets a very bad cough that could be bronchitis, pneumonia or even tuberculosis. Max tries to impress upon him the need for medicine but Horst is too cold and sick to care. Max ends up "holding" Horst gently, through words – not actually touching – and he makes Horst feel warm and safe. The final scene of the play is a few days later. Horst has been taking medicine provided by Max and he is on the mend. Horst keeps bugging Max to find out how he got the medicine and finally Max tells him that he performed fellatio on the Captain of the guards. This does not please Horst. Eventually this Captain comes to check on Max and realizes that he has been duped; it is Horst that is ill, not Max. The Captain order Horst to throw his hat on the electric fence and to then retrieve it (which would kill him). Horst turns and gives Max his gesture for "I love you" before he tries to attack the Captain. Horst is killed and Max is told to clear up his body. Max does and then goes back to work. He goes back to Horst and changes his shirt with a yellow star for Horst's one with a pink triangle. After declaring himself homosexual he kills himself on the electric fence.

A Brief Production History of Martin Sherman's *Bent*.

Acclaimed in both London and New York, *Bent* was nominated for a Tony Award in 1980 for Best Play (1) and won Sherman the Dramatists Guild's Hull-Warriner Award. In 1998, *Bent* was selected as one of the National Theatre's NT2000 Platform Series of the one hundred most significant plays of the twentieth century, in a project charting the progress of drama through the twentieth century (2).

Bent opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London in May 1979 and then transferred to the Criterion in July 1979. Directed by Robert Chetwyn, it featured Ian McKellen in the role of Max and Tom Bell as Horst.

That same year, in December, *Bent*, directed by Robert Allan Ackerman, opened at the New Apollo Theater in New York, with Richard Gere playing Max, David Dukes as Horst.

1997 Sherman adapted *Bent* into a screenplay with Director, Sean Mathias. Clive Owen played Max, and Lothaire Bluteau played Horst. Ian McKellen, who had originated the role of Max almost twenty years earlier, played Uncle Freddie in the film version.

In 1981, *Vancouver* was taken by storm when the Tamahnous Theatre-Arts Club Theatre co-production opened at the Seymour Street Arts Club. Directed by Larry Lillo, the production featured Allan Gray as Max, John Moffat as Horst, Edward Astley as Rudy, Alex Diakun as Greta, Tom Braidwood as Uncle Freddie and Stephen E. Miller, Bruce Greenwood, Alex Diakun and Glen Thompson as Nazi Guards. After running to sold-out houses for over four months, the run ended when one of the lead actors was injured in a motor accident.

In 2006, *Bent* was revived in London's West End at the Trafalgar Studios, directed by Daniel Kramer with Alan Cumming as Max and Chris New as Horst.

Bent has been staged in more than 40 countries since 1979.

1. http://www.tonyawards.com/p/tonys_search

2. <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/NT2000%20One%20Hundred%20Plays%20of%20the%20Century+11741.twl>

BENT: MARTIN SHERMAN'S VISION OF GAY HISTORY AND GAY LIBERATION IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST

Bent is a "history" play in two senses of the term: it belongs to the history of gay culture in the 1970s — to the new wave of emergent gay drama that predates the AIDS crisis — and redirects theatrical attention to the concerns of a community, on both sides of the Atlantic, determined to resist social oppression and the dramatic stereotypes that perpetuated it. But the play is also "historical" in quite another sense. Sherman begins the play in Nazi Berlin, immediately after the "Night of the Long Knives" (early July 1934), when Hitler sent his SS on a murderous rampage against Röhm and his Brownshirt acolytes whose sexual preferences were the excuse for a violent political purge. There is a very literal throat-slashing of a gay storm trooper early in the play — a hideous warning to Max, the protagonist, of the consequences of a gay existence. And Sherman ends the play in a concentration camp, where Max — ever the wheeler-dealer — has managed to trade the pink triangle of the homosexual for the far more preferable yellow star of the Jew. Better Jewish than gay in Dachau! If we take this irony for granted in 2007, it is partly because *Bent* has drawn our attention to a phase of gay history that, at the time, was little known: the fate, worse than the Jews', of the homosexual in Hitler's Germany. It was not until the 1980s* that there was some systematic attempt to research this phase of gay history, and Martin Sherman virtually pioneers the revisionist history of homosexual culture in the Third Reich.

Is *Bent*, then, a Holocaust play? In the sense that Max struggles to survive oblivion, Sherman stands in the company of dramatists like Joshua Sobol, whose *Ghetto* is another remarkable contemplation on the theme of survival and the huge cost it entails to "stay alive" in the Holocaust. "Staying alive" is indeed what drives Max and motivates him, understandably, like nothing else. But what survives as a consequence of Max's compromises, betrayals, and smart dealings with the Nazi oppressor is his worst possible identity. Self-respect, shaky to start off with, is consistently displaced by self-contempt. Staying alive — physically — means deconstructing or denying the self he would like to be, and reconstructing out of the rubble of what he has become a vicious and self-hating surrogate self: an "I" who would help to kick his gay friend to death in order to save his own gay skin, have necrophiliac sex with the corpse of an angelic child in order to assert a false heterosexual identity, and embrace the fake role of the Jew as a

survival tactic to conceal the truth of his homosexuality.

But *Bent*, in 2007, is more than a history play or a Holocaust play and we should not be distracted by period or place to see it solely in these terms. In Eytan Fox's recent movie, *The Bubble* (2007), two young gay lovers — an Israeli army reservist and a Palestinian — go to see a performance of *Bent* in Tel Aviv, and the camera takes us into the theatre and plays one of Sherman's finest love-scenes. It offers the two modern-day lovers a technique for overcoming distance, division, opposition, and social oppression; and it suggests a tenuous form of hope even for those on opposite sides of a great divide. *Bent*, for them, is not a history play but a metaphor for a kind of gay "liberation" — even if that liberation is as fragile as a bubble, and as dangerously insulating as a bubble often proves to be against harsh reality. In other words, *Bent*'s "existential" implications may override the play's other undeniable readings and project both history and Holocaust as distancing devices that enable us to revision a great play of the 1970s and acknowledge its relevance now.

The dynamic of Sherman's play traces Max's journey from his Act One endorsement and enactment of the Nazi stereotype of the gay man's emotional deficiencies — "gays can't love", "gays can't maintain relationships for longer than a day" — to Max's Act Two "liberation" of himself from current clichés by countermanding and embracing his gay identity as a lived-through experience in the company of Horst. It is not merely a matter of resisting Nazi oppression. It is the strenuous achievement of expunging the Nazi within, and recovering the sort of authenticity that the fearful homosexual community of Berlin conceals beneath the identity of the much "safer" other: the family-man, the transvestite who can shed his women's clothes at will, the aggressive heterosexual, and even the fake-Jew. Act Two of *Bent*, as the Eytan Fox movie reads it, is a love story in which Max's relationship with Horst affirms his capacity to love and his willingness to be loved, and reasserts the idea of a homosexual solidarity as the only feasible means of survival. It is a consoling idea — but, in the concentration camp, it is also a delusional "bubble" and powerless against the random brutality and violence waiting to assail it.

Bent ends in an ambiguous combination of victory and defeat, of affirmation and despair. Horst is murdered in a gratuitous act of Nazi savagery, and Max is ordered to dump his corpse in an

adjoining burial pit. For the first time in the play he is enabled to embrace his lover by touching his dead body, and in a final act of symbolic solidarity he changes the yellow star of the Jew for the pink triangle of the "queer." No more subterfuge. No more self-denial. No more shame. No more smart lies. But discovering his personhood pushes Max one step further. Horst had defied the Nazi who shot him; and Max determines to assert his own liberation through the same sort of defiant gesture. "If a person who's still a person commits suicide, well... it's a kind of defiance, isn't it? They hate that — it's an act of free will." Horst's assertion of absolute freedom through self-immolation defines the extreme ambivalence of *Bent* as a gay liberation play where Max's final act of victorious self-definition is achievable only in dying for it. We are left with a paradox, not easily resolvable. By deliberately rejecting his instinct to "stay alive" Max has achieved an existential victory — but what remains is a paradigm of gay love and liberation that cannot be sustained as a lived-through experience. It is not the *physical body* of the gay lover that survives oblivion, but the exemplary *idea* of the gay self redeemed from the vicious constructions imposed upon it by the system, and from the gay man's tendency to internalize these negative constructions and so deny his selfhood. Liberation conjoined to death is an extreme and terrible solution to the dilemma of gay survival. But extreme circumstances will inevitably create terrible solutions, and we are left — finally — with the realization that contextual history and the horror of the Holocaust are inseparable from this extraordinary dramatization of an existential predicament.

Errol Durbach

* See Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (Edinburgh, 1987).

S e l e c t e d D a t e s 1 9 3 3 - 1 9 3 6

- 30 January 1933 Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany.
- 20 March 1933 First concentration camp opens at Dachau.
- 7 April 1933 Jews excluded from government employment, including teaching jobs at all levels.
- 14 July 1933 New law provides basis for forced sterilization of handicapped persons, Gypsies, and Blacks.
- October 1934 First major wave of arrests of homosexuals throughout Germany.
- 15 September 1935 Anti-Jewish racial and citizenship laws issued at Nuremberg.
- 1 August 1936 Summer Olympics begin in Berlin.

From <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics/>

P a r a g r a p h 1 7 5 a n d o t h e r s e x u a l d e v i a n c e l a w s

Criminal prosecution of gay men in Germany dates to the early middle ages. A national prohibition, Paragraph 175, was added to the Reich Penal Code in 1871. It read:

An unnatural sex act committed between persons of male sex or by humans with animals is punishable by imprisonment; the loss of civil rights might also be imposed.

When the Nazi's came to power in 1933, they put a halt to efforts seeking reform of this law. In 1935, after the murder of Ernst Roem, the NSDAP [National Socialist German Workers Party] amended the Paragraph 175 to close what were seen as loopholes in the current law.

The new law had three parts:

Paragraph 175: A male who commits a sex offense with another male or allows himself to be used by another male for a sex offense shall be punished with imprisonment.

Where a party was not yet twenty-one years of age at the time of the act, the court may in especially minor cases refrain from punishment.

Paragraph 175a: Penal servitude up to 10 years or, where there are mitigating circumstances, imprisonment of not less than three months shall apply to: (1) a male who, with violence or the threat of violence to body and soul or life, compels another male to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (2) a male who, by abusing a relationship of dependence based upon service, employment or subordination, induces another male to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (3) a male over 21 years of age who seduces a male person under twenty-one years to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (4) a male who publicly commits a sex offense with males or allows himself to be abused by males for a sex offense or offers himself for the same.

Paragraph 175b: An unnatural sex act committed by humans with animals is punishable by imprisonment; the loss of civil rights might also be imposed.

Paragraph 174 of the penal code forbade incest and other sexual offenses with dependents, while paragraph 176 outlawed pedophilia. Persons convicted under these laws also wore the pink triangle.

From Scott Safier's site: <http://www.pink-triangle.org/>