



Sherman, Martin (b. 1938)

by Bud Coleman

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Activist and fellow playwright Larry Kramer paid tribute to Martin Sherman by noting that he "has consistently written about his sexuality and has managed to make a living out of it." This is no small feat for an artist whose peers have more often than not created their art from inside the closet. Best known for his groundbreaking play *Bent* (1978), this iconoclastic playwright and screenwriter has created an impressive body of work.

The only child of Russian-Jewish parents, Sherman was born in Philadelphia on December 22, 1938, but grew up in Camden, New Jersey. His father was an attorney. Yiddish was spoken at home; and as his grandparents were observant, they kept a Kosher home.

Frequent theater trips to Philadelphia and New York City helped Sherman get through adolescence.

Sherman was educated at Boston University, where he received a B.A. and an M.F.A. in theater. Although trained as an actor, he was early drawn to writing plays. He describes his early efforts as "terrible," though some were given Off-Off-Broadway productions by the Herbert Berghof Playwrights Foundation, including the one-act play *Next Year in Jerusalem* (1968).

In Sherman's own account, a 1975 production of his play *Passing By* by London's Gay Sweatshop "was the first good production I'd ever had of anything." The story of the relationship between two men--a painter and a diver--in New York, whose bond is tested by illness and by their focus on career goals, *Passing By* and another early gay-themed play, *Cracks* (1975), set in the Los Angeles home of a recently murdered rock star, anticipate his breakthrough achievement in *Bent* but fail to rise to the latter's moral seriousness.

Sherman wrote *Bent* for Gay Sweatshop, a company devoted to using theater to raise consciousness, but the theater's artistic director--recognizing the work's wider significance and potential--encouraged him to "give this play to the world." It opened at London's Royal Court Theatre to popular and critical acclaim and established Sherman as a playwright to be taken seriously.

The play can be seen as a product of the intellectual foment spawned by the gay liberation movement. Sherman was living in New York City during and after the Stonewall riots of 1969. He criticized the New York gay scene as too commercial and too fashion conscious. He especially objected to gay men walking around Greenwich Village in Nazi uniforms, which were deemed to be "sexually titillating" and avant garde.

Sherman's repulsion at this phenomenon was influenced by his identification as both a gay man and a Jew. He knew that he had to address the lack of historical perspective that allowed gay men to identify, if even only on the superficial level of fashion, with Nazism.

The first play to depict the brutal treatment of gay men by the Nazi regime and their incarceration in concentration camps, *Bent* concerns the fates of three men caught up in the rising oppression of the era.

Although historian Nicholas de Jongh calls *Bent* "one of the most significant plays produced in the post-Second World War theatre" and the Royal National Theatre included *Bent* in its list of the 100 most significant plays of the twentieth century, Sherman had a great deal of difficulty finding backers for the work.

The initial London reviews were mixed, but audiences from the very beginning embraced Sherman's very human story of a hedonist finally finding the moral backbone to fall in love and embrace his gay identity--literally donning a pink triangle--even at the cost of his life. Bolstered by star casting--Ian McKellen in London and Richard Gere in New York--*Bent* enjoyed a successful commercial run in both cities. It has subsequently been translated into thirty languages and has served as a vehicle for a number of prominent actors.

Interestingly, however, despite the advances of the modern gay rights movement and the increased awareness of Holocaust studies, including wider acknowledgment of the suffering of homosexuals under the Nazis, Sherman's play did not reach the silver screen until 1997 (directed by Sean Matthias), and then with an NC-17 rating because of its "strong sense of graphic sexuality."

Even some recent stage productions, such as the one by the Hot House Theater in St. Louis in 2000, have met with reactionary responses. The St. Louis theater lost its state arts council funding as a result of its production. Clearly, the play and its subject matter still have the power to make mainstream audiences uncomfortable in the extreme.

Like *Bent*, Sherman's plays often focus on characters who feel they can ignore the world around them, only later to be brought up short by the consequences of their ignorance. The playwright explores the cost of willful blindness in such works as *Messiah* (1982), which is set in 1665 Poland when one-third of the Jewish population was slaughtered by Cossacks; *Rose* (1999), a one-woman play in which an 80-year-old Jewish widow recounts a life that includes surviving the Warsaw ghetto; *When She Danced* (1985), a comedy about Isadora Duncan in Paris; *A Madhouse in Goa* (1989), an apocalyptic satire set on Corfu and Santorini; and *Some Sunny Day* (1996), a surrealistic story set in Cairo during World War II.

Sherman has also adapted for the stage E. M. Foster's novel *A Passage to India* (2002), as well as updated versions of Pirandello's *Così è, si vi pare* (as *Absolutely! [Perhaps]*, 2003) and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (2007).

Among Sherman's screenwriting credits are Waris Hussein's movie made for British television *Clothes in the Wardrobe* (also known as *The Summer House*, 1992), Franco Zeffirelli's *Callas Forever* (2002), Robert Allan Ackerman's American television version of Tennessee Williams's *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (2003), and Stephen Frears' *Mrs. Henderson Presents* (2005).

Although his screenplays for these projects all have gay elements and appeal, Sherman's most explicitly gay-themed screenplay (other than for *Bent*) is the one he wrote for Nancy Meckler's *Indian Summer* (also known as *Alive and Kicking*, 1996), which explores the growing relationship between an HIV-positive dancer (Jason Flemyng) and an older AIDS counselor (Anthony Sher).

Sherman has a long-standing interest in popular music--among his earliest major assignments was writing the script for a television special featuring Cass Elliot, "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore," in 1973. However, it was thirty years later before Sherman ventured into musical theater.

In 2003, he was commissioned to write a new book for the American premiere of *The Boy from Oz*, based on the original Australian libretto by Nick Enright. The musical, starring the charismatic Hugh Jackman, set for itself the rather daunting task of telling the life story of Peter Allen (using his music and lyrics) from cradle

to grave. Sherman unflinchingly tackled Allen's complicated bisexuality. His work on *The Boy from Oz* earned Sherman a Tony nomination for best book of a musical.

Like many writers, Sherman sees an aesthetic strength in being an outsider, not only as a gay Jewish man, but also as an American who has lived in London since 1980. "I have been able to flourish there in a way that I don't think I could have done here [in America]," he told reporters. He added that he did not move to London to "leave" the United States because he was "disgusted" with his home country; rather "I fell in love with England."

As a self-described outsider, Sherman has remained very discreet about his personal life. Actor and friend Rupert Graves has remarked that Sherman is "kind of elusive, very hard to pin down," a judgment with which Ian McKellen concurs: "There's a lot about Martin that's very private."

In 1991, Sherman joined other openly gay British artists in an open letter to the *Guardian* to distance themselves from Derek Jarman's public criticism of Ian McKellen's acceptance of a knighthood from the anti-gay Conservative Government. "Never again will public figures be able to claim that they have to keep secret their homosexuality in fear of it damaging their careers. Ian McKellen provides an inspiration to us all, not only as an artist of extraordinary gifts, but as a public figure of remarkable honesty and dignity."

Critical reaction to Sherman's work for stage and screen is often mixed, but audiences regularly respond favorably to his multifaceted characters caught up in tumultuous historical situations.

As the author of one of the seminal gay dramas of the twentieth century, Sherman has no regrets about being a pioneer, but he does not want to be limited as to his subject matter. As he told *The Advocate* in 2000, "At the time I wrote *Bent* it was important to declare yourself as a gay writer. It seems to me that we have now reached this point, which I think is extremely healthy, where I can write about anything."

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About the Author

Bud Coleman, Associate Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at the University of Colorado at Boulder, is a former dancer with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (as Natasha Notgoudenuff), Fort Worth Ballet, Kinesis, and Ballet Austin. He has directed and choreographed numerous productions and published in several journals and encyclopedias.