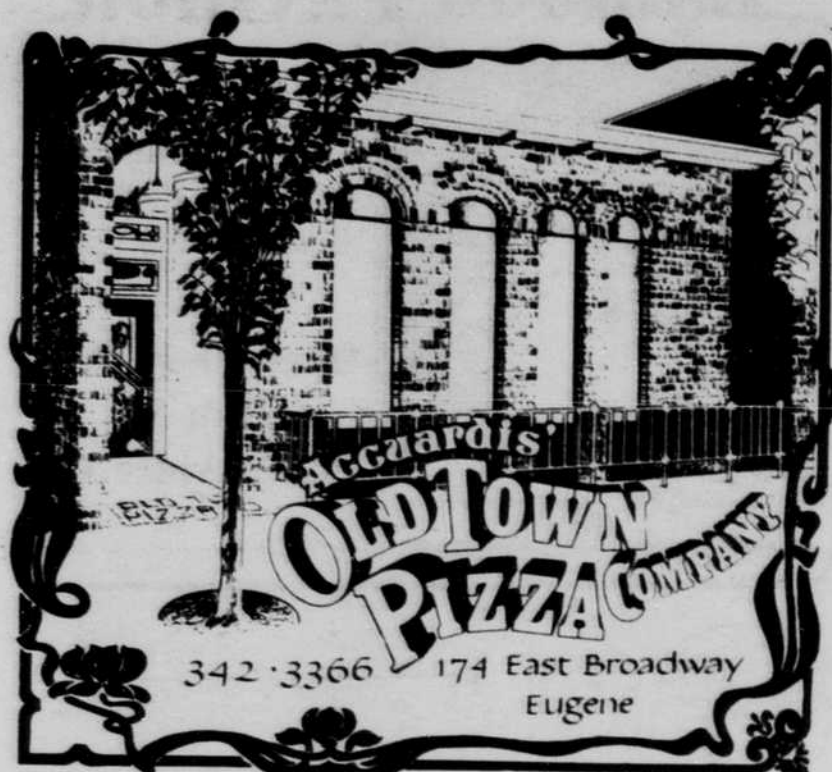




Bent portrays Nazi purge of confined homosexuals

By MOLLY MOORE
Of the Emerald

"I love you. What's wrong with that?" cries Max at the end of the University Theatre's production of *Bent*. The problem is that he's talking to a dead man.

Max is the central character of this powerful drama set in Nazi Germany. The University Theatre opened its season Friday with this controversial play about the Nazi purge of homosexuals in 1934. Nearly half a million people died in concentration camps as a result of this purge, called The Night of the Long Knives, and the University Theatre presents it with all its horror intact.

The action is riveting. Max (Michael Nering) and his lover Rudy (Todd Hermanson) barely escape capture, only to be caught after two years of hiding and running. Imprisoned in Dachau, Max meets Horst (Barry Pitzer) who teaches him to survive and to love despite the terror of their surroundings.

Bloody violence and psychological shocks leave the audience gasping and grateful for the frequent humor, a necessary counterpoint to the brutal power of the jolts. We meet truly likeable characters, yet find that their circumstances are that much more horrifying in contrast to their humanity.

The audience is very much a part of *Bent*, intimate voyeurs during the most private moments, unable to escape the unbearable hidden sufferings. We are drawn in by the humor, overwhelmed by the pain, broken by the sorrow. Despite fears of a negative reception (due to the play's graphic portrayal of homosexuality), much of the sell-out audience wiped away tears during a standing ovation on opening night.

The actor's roles in *Bent* are unusual in that they give males a chance to portray characters full of sensitivity, feeling and softness. Director of the Theatre



Emerald photo

Grant McKernie says that "men must have the opportunity to be sensitive on stage," and in this respect, the play is admirably different from typical Eugene theatre. There is no doubt concerning the characters' sincerity, no room for stereotypes. We must believe in the fragility of their lives and therefore cannot believe in the myth of perversity.

Director Robert Barton draws an incredibly powerful performance from his cast, by building on his past work with Nering and Hermanson and by keeping rehearsals closed while molding the powerful intensity needed for this production.

The acting is honed and timeless. Hermanson is heart-winningly true, revealing a character of complex simplicity. Nering is absorbing and mag-

netic as we see his character gradually change. Pitzer is both gruff and gentle, so realistic in his characterization that we are transfixed. Johnathan Mansfield as the nightclub owner Greta, and D. Patrick Lawler as Max's Uncle Freddie lend very strong and meaningful support to the leads, while Eric Johnson and Carl Matthey are both quite good in smaller roles. It should be noted that the entire cast and crew are students, including scene designer V.F. Zealcita, whose work is effective and startling, and lighting designer Mike Fernbach, whose spotlights and streetlamps intensify the most emotional moments in the show. Johnathan Mansfield has composed background music of a lilting, haunting quality that remains with us after the show ends

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