

To be or not to be (out of the closet)

Breaking the Code is the true-life fifties nightmare
of one of Britain's foremost scientists

by Kathay Duff

Artists Repertory Theatre continues its tradition of presenting new and intriguing works with the Portland premiere of *Breaking the Code* by Hugh Whitmore. This unusual play is a fantasy for the stage, based loosely on the biography *Alan Turing: The Enigma* by Andrew Hodges. It explores the life of brilliant British scientist Alan Turing, a WWII hero who cracked the baffling German Enigma Code which gave the Allies access to the secret codes that governed German naval activity. He is also known for his discoveries in the field of military intelligence and made instrumental contributions toward the development of the first computer.

THEATER

In spite of his supreme contributions to his country, Turing became the object of political police persecution when he reported a robbery of his home and revealed to the police in the course of the investigation that he was gay. Same-sex relations were a crime in England in the 1950s and Turing was forced to undergo a humiliating investigation, prosecution and punishment. His choice was imprisonment or "rehabilitation"—a treatment using female hormones that was supposed to cure homosexuality. Turing chose the latter; he was to die shortly after completion of a year of hormone therapy. His death was officially labeled a suicide which was contested by those who knew him.

Hugh Whitmore's approach to putting biography on stage is refreshingly non-literal. This is not an evening of theater where we march chronologically through a person's life from birth to death. The play floats, soars and zigzags forwards, backwards and sideways through Turing's life; we glimpse a young man in his early twenties, and the next scene flashes ahead to the police investigation as it gathers momentum. By refusing to deal chronologically and predictably in presenting biographical work, playwright Whitmore has given us a thought provoking journey that commands our full intelligence and involvement.

At over two and a half hours, this play has some plodding and tedious moments, but director Jon Kretzu has approached the material in such a creative way as to minimize the playwright's tendency to include too much. The simple silvery white set by Tim Stapleton was used to great effect. Bare except for two chairs and a table, the set provides an uncluttered backdrop for the large issues, ideas and leaps of space and time that this play attempts. Minimal blocking and a lack of physical scene changes keep the clip precise.

Along the side of the set are chairs that the actors retire to when not on stage. They sit quietly

observing Turing at the various stages of his life. This touch reminded me of Wim Wender's film *Wings of Desire* where unseen angels constantly watch over the inhabitants of Berlin, often as close as a shoulder—sadly and kindly watching, unable to interfere or interact. This interesting touch lent an air of poignancy and continuity to the proceedings.

Artistic director Allen Nause takes the stage in the lead role and is rarely out of our sight. As portrayed by Nause, Turing is a man whose brilliant mind races so fast his sentences come out in stammered soundbites. Biting his nails or absent-mindedly rumpling his hair, Nause is one of those actors who so completely inhabits his character that we no longer see an actor on stage—we are in the totally believable presence of this supremely intelligent yet dangerously childlike man, Turing.

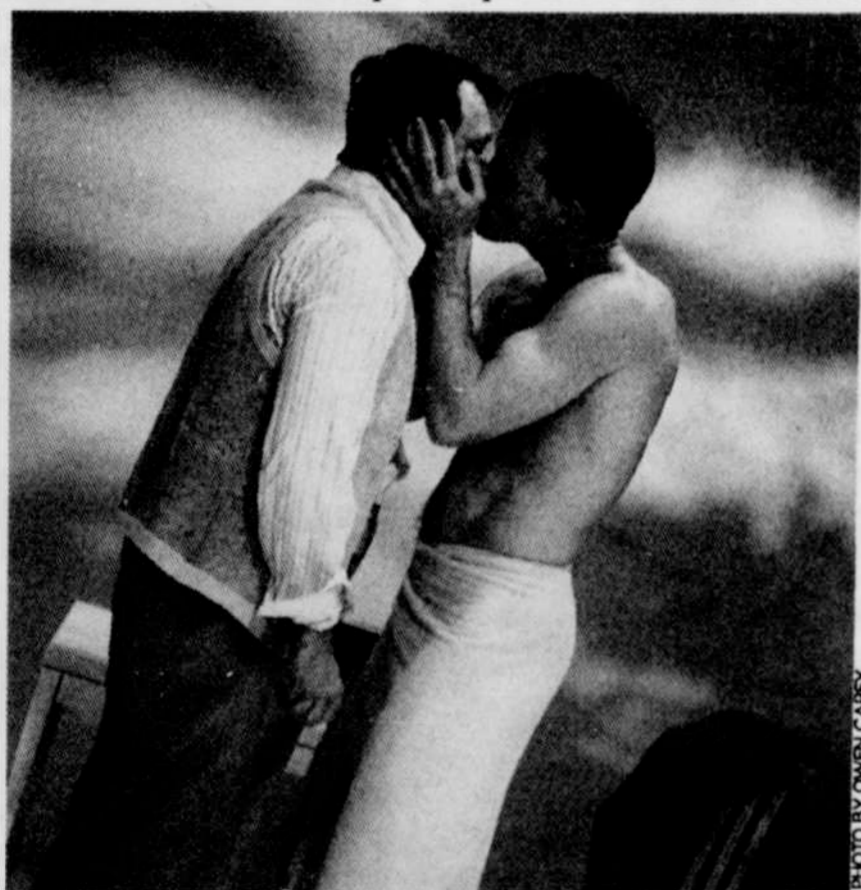
In a flawless cast that turns in wonderful supporting performances, veteran actor Gaynor Sterchi is a standout as Turing's mother, Sarah. Even when annoying her son with a cheerful idiocy about his profession or playing matchmaker with one of his female colleagues, you can't help but like her. At the heart of the character is a fierce pride and love of her son that cannot be replaced. This relationship provides the play's most moving moment when Turing must "come out" to his mother and tell her of his arrest. A welter of wildly differing emotions struggle for expression in her face. It is a sensitive portrayal that Sterchi keeps at just the right level, giving this character great dignity.

Breaking the Code is filled with levels of meaning. It is an intensely political play. At the same time it's deeply personal. It echoes the struggle of gays and lesbians to claim heroes and role models while at the same time respecting the right of each individual to make the choice of where, when

and if to come out. Turing was not a political martyr: his persecution came because of his honest, naive nature—he revealed to the wrong people at the wrong time his true nature. A war hero for breaking the secret military code, he was reviled and oppressed for breaking the secret social code of his time regarding sexuality. Possessed of an acute mind, Turing seems incapable of bringing the same acuity to focus on the danger he puts himself in socially and professionally.

Breaking the Code is one of those rare plays that has the ability to stir and amuse its audience, and educate them at the same time. It will stay in your mind and prompt thought and debate long after the last spotlight has dimmed.

Breaking the Code runs through Feb. 20 at the Wilson Center for the Performing Arts, 1111 SW 10th Ave., in Portland. There will be a benefit performance for Project Quest on Sunday, Feb. 20. Tickets \$20. Call 242-9043 or 242-2420 for ticket information.



Alan Nause (left) and Stephen Rouffy

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