

**THEATER**

**Save the country**

Tony Kushner parallels Nazi Germany and GOP America **BY STEPHEN BLAIR**

**W**hat do Nazi Germany and George W. Bush's America have in common? More than you may want to know, suggests an upcoming production by Theatre Vertigo.

The play in question is *A Bright Room Called Day*, written in 1987 by Tony Kushner, the gay author of Pulitzer Prize winner *Angels in America*. Using poetic language and stark imagery, he compares the rise of Hitler and fascism in early 1930s Germany with Ronald Reagan's ultra-conservative presidency in the 1980s. In his notes, however, Kushner encourages theater companies to update the play to reflect current political situations.

Theatre Vertigo has stayed true to most of the play, especially the scenes that depict a group of German artists and societal misfits whose lives and freedoms are threatened by the rise of fascism. In the original version, a modern-day American Jewish woman named Zillah interrupts the 1930s storyline to rant about Reagan. But in this production, she takes fire at our current president, evoking not-so-subtle parallels between Dubya and Hitler.

Gary Norman, an outspoken gay Portland actor with a prominent role in the play, recently met with *Just Out* to discuss *Bright Room* and its implications for queers.

**N**orman is a hairdresser at London Influence downtown. His previous theater credits include *What the Butler Saw* and *Christmas with the Crawfords* at Triangle Productions and a recent production of *Man of La Mancha* by Lakewood Theatre Company in Lake Oswego.

In *Bright Room*, Norman portrays Baz, a member of a leftist circle of friends and an



Gary Norman (left, with Julie Starbird) stars in *A Bright Room Called Day* as Baz, a persecuted homosexual under a fascist regime. Sound familiar?

employee at the Berlin Institute for Human Sexuality. Prior to the rise of the Nazis, Baz enjoyed a thriving gay culture in Berlin, filled with nightclubs and drag bars. But the emerging Nazi movement condemned homosexuals because they did not reproduce the Aryan race.

Norman likened Baz's plight to the struggles that face queer Americans under Bush's leadership.

"During an interrogation, my character is flat out told that they're building a concentration camp for people like him because they knew he was gay," he said. "Now we've had this twisted measure wanting to ban gay marriage, which I think is ridiculous. I got married this year. Bush wants to amend the Constitution.

He wants to write discrimination in it against gay people. I've heard that the evangelical Bible-thumper movement is getting bigger and bigger. They're so hypocritical and hateful. They're the most un-Christian Christians I've ever seen or heard."

Prior to starting this production, Norman's only exposure to Kushner's work was through HBO's miniseries of *Angels in America*. He fell in love with *Bright Room* on his first reading.

"It's beautiful and thought-provoking," he said. "I knew I had to be a part of the production. I do like doing musicals, but it's not my first choice. I'd rather do something that's got some meat on it. If I wasn't cast, I was going to volunteer to help costume it."

Upon landing the role of Baz, Norman did research on fascism and the treatment of homosexuals in 1930s Germany.

**T**heatre Vertigo considered producing *A Bright Room Called Day* last season but decided to pass it by. "It made the cut this year," Norman said, "which is pretty interesting given what's going on in the world, or this country anyway."

*Bright Room* is no period piece about problems that are over and done with. "It really points out that what's going on there could be going on in any city in this country right now," Norman explained. "It doesn't have to be Berlin in 1933."

It's mind-blowing, Norman said, that Hitler's rise to power and his crimes against humanity were ever allowed to happen. "If our country continues to go the way it is going, people will start to see the similarities."

True, *Bright Room* isn't the most cheerful holiday play you could drum up. But it's certainly one of your best shots to see provocative and substantial theater this season.

"We're hoping that people have seen enough *Christmas Carols* and *SantaLand Diaries* and they'll take a chance and come see something fresh," Norman said. **J**

*A BRIGHT ROOM CALLED DAY* plays 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday from Nov. 26 to Jan. 1, 2005, at Theater Theatre, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$15 from [www.theatrevertigo.org](http://www.theatrevertigo.org).

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