

# A queer courage in the face of death

The Third Reich haunts the London stage, while Scotland's nomadic national theatre wins Glasgow over with a warring pair of queens

SUSANNAH CLAPP

**Bent**

Trafalgar Studios, London SW1

**Metamorphosis**

Lyric Hammersmith, London W4

SUDDENLY, THE Second World War and Weimar are breaking out all over the stage. Next week a new version of *Cabaret* opens in the West End. But before that comes an enthralling revival of Martin Sherman's *Bent*. First seen at the Royal Court in 1979 (Sherman approached Gay Sweatshop with his play, but the company suggested that it should have a less specific audience), this was for many spectators a revelation: a study of the Nazis' treatment of homosexuals, which followed a gay man from hedonism in Weimar to hell in Dachau.

It was not only the subject that made *Bent* explosive. It was its queasy, courageous mixture of terrible events and flip-pant sentences. Sherman's play begins with the etiolated and excellent Alan Cumming, an Aubrey Beardsley figure in a kimono, examining the bruises that a stormtrooper lover has left on his bottom after a night in a bar. In flight from the Nazis in a forest camp, Cumming's dainty lover grumbles: 'I'm a dancer, not Mowgli.' In Dachau, Cumming stands side by side with another inmate, overlooked from a watchtower, in front of an electric fence: they comfort each other by an erotic exchange of words; they both have orgasms. There is a sort of dodgy pun at the very centre of the play: camp life means camp, as in concentration, and as in flounce.

You might fear the *Titanic* effect: a romance hiking a lift on a tragedy. But not in the hands of Daniel Kramer, who, at 29, has directed a string of revivals that prove him capable of firing up any stage. Helped by Robin Don's putty-and-grime-coloured design, from which things are flung throughout the evening so that, at the desolate end, the world of the play is just a slab of concrete, Kramer tautens every moment that could be soggy. That Dachau sex exchange – all grey, quietly lit, with the two men totally still – is spellbinding. And he has found in Chris New – straight from Rada – an actor whose huge talent is unusually matched by his restraint.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is another metaphor for fascism, in the interpretation adapted and directed by David Farr and Gisli Orn Gardarsson. Kafka's 1912 story about Gregor Samsa, the travelling salesman who wakes up one morning to find he has turned into a beetle, is seen as a political fable, presaging the rise of the Nazis and as a tale in which not just the hero but everyone around him is changed.

The Lyric Hammersmith has been one of the few theatres to combine speech-based and movement theatre and it has never done so to such good effect. Borkur Jonsson's ingenious design creates a downstairs area that is spruce, orderly,

stuffyly naturalistic: the beetle-person's family move stiffly around it, like Prussian dolls, or clockwork creatures, who spoon sugar into their cups in time to the strange, rippling chords of music by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

The bank-official father becomes more and more buttoned up in the uniform he insists on wearing round the house; his daughter bounces buxomly, wholesomely, flaxenly, a vision of Aryan girlhood: at first dismayed, later irritated and embarrassed, they finally turn into persecutors.

Above stairs, where Gregor is trapped since his transformation, is the realm of the mad person in the attic – the barmy brain in the scrubbed body. Everything is skewed. The bed stands on its end; cups and plates stick to the walls. Waking up with his limbs akimbo, poking out of his sheets with the face of a human and the angular shape of an insect, Gregor is played by Gardarsson (one of Iceland's national gymnastic team) with a pouncing, terrified athleticism. He manoeuvres himself downstairs by squatting on all fours on the banister rail; he negotiates a room by leaping on to the table and spinning round a

standard lamp.

Shunned by his family as 'vermin', he hangs himself slowly from a rope and is left dangling upside down like a dead larva.

As they decide where to dump the inconvenient body, a screen behind them blazes with light and foliage. It's springtime. But not for the entomologically challenged.