

# Metamorphosis

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## ARTS/THEATRE



**Bent** ★★☆☆☆  
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★★★☆☆

### Bent

Trafalgar Studios 1, London SW1 (0870 060 6632) to Jan 13.

Martin Sherman's *Bent* could easily have dated badly. First performed in 1979, it was written to address the underacknowledgment of homosexual suffering under the Nazis. Not surprisingly, one or two of its touches – the closeted, gay-bashing killer, for example – have since become middlebrow clichés. But the play stands up well, in part because its message about being true to yourself is pretty timeless, and in part because of Sherman's skilfully carpentered script and grasp of theatrical spectacle.

Daniel Kramer's production brings out the last quality very effectively from the moment when the first scene's bedroom farce is interrupted by an SS squad sent to murder the young man whom Max (Alan Cumming) picked up the night before. On the run with his boyfriend Rudy (Kevin Trainor), Max makes his way through a neatly rendered Germany. Betrayed by a transvestite nightclub performer (ghoulishly played by Richard Bremner), and encouraged to betray himself by his closeted uncle (Hugh Ross), he soon finds himself on the train to Dachau.

Trainor gives a mannered performance in the first act, playing his fussy, effeminate character as a cross between Charles Hawtrey and Penfold from *Danger Mouse*. During his and Cumming's many rapid exchanges, both actors seem slightly self-enclosed, as if firing off lines rather than reacting to one another. In Act II, Cumming is paired with Chris New (both pictured above), who copes impressively with the part of Horst, a proudly gay prisoner, and things pick up a bit. Even so, not everything works. Though moving, the once taboo-busting verbal sex-scene comes dangerously close to provoking laughter.

This is partly a problem with the play itself, which makes heavy demands of the actors towards the end. But Cumming, despite his star quality, doesn't quite anchor the production. He's good at projecting extremes of emotion, but less good at exuding misery: he seems happiest camping it up in the first act, and even when his spirit has almost been broken in Dachau, his Max is always ready with a roguish grin,

and while he pulls off the ending, the production struggles to hold the middle ground between stoic wit and full-blown horror. **Christopher Taylor**

### Metamorphosis

Lyric Hammersmith, London W6 (0870 050 0511) to Oct 28

Kafka's story of Gregor, a salesman who wakes to find he has been transformed into an insect, might seem the stuff of drama. But it's a challenge for theatre to live up to the special effects that, say, David Cronenberg had at his disposal when filming

*The Fly*, and the spectacle of an actor traipsing about the stage in a dodgy costume is enough to send the wrong sort of chill down the spine.

But, visually at least, this new adaptation does not disappoint. The Icelandic company Vesturport is well versed in the demands of physical theatre, and in Gísli Örn Gardarsson (who co-directs with the Lyric's David Farr and plays Gregor) it boasts a gymnastic performer of rare skill.

The action takes place on a two-storey set: the lower level represents Gregor's parents' drab living-room; the upper level Gregor's bedroom. Here comes the clever bit: the bedroom has been rotated 90 degrees so that the floor, bed and furnishings hang where the back wall should be, 21 feet up, facing straight out at the audience. The vertigo-inducing double-take the viewer must make induces precisely the feelings of dislocation that lie at the heart of Kafka's tale; it also creates breathtaking opportunities for Gardarsson's insect to clamber and fling itself, without supporting wires, around the floor and walls of its domestic prison.

The excitement of watching Gardarsson do this never really wears off, and he pulls off a suitably virtuosic trick in the finale. But it is by far the best aspect of this adaptation, which becomes rather repetitive. Every scene makes the same point (narrow bourgeois family can't accommodate alien – and alienated – son), and while it's fine for a short story to turn on one clever conceit, a play that runs for 90 minutes does demand some form of development, whether of characters or themes.

A soundtrack by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis (of the Bad Seeds) is atmospheric, but the script fails to resonate, seems strangely dated and irrelevant in 2006, and, despite all the visual inventiveness, sells Kafka rather short. **Tim Auld**