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Camden Fringe 2024

The Pink List

Fabulette Production



Genre: Historical (<https://fringereview.co.uk/festival/camden-fringe/?festivalgenre=historical>), LGBT (<https://fringereview.co.uk/festival/camden-fringe/?festivalgenre=lgbt>), Music (<https://fringereview.co.uk/festival/camden-fringe/?festivalgenre=music>), Musical Theatre (<https://fringereview.co.uk/festival/camden-fringe/?festivalgenre=musical-theatre>), New Writing (<https://fringereview.co.uk/festival/camden-fringe/?festivalgenre=new-writing>)
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Low Down

A long overdue engagement with West Germany's appalling, discriminatory treatment and persecution of gay men in the decades after the war, who had already been victims of the Nazi regime.

Review

We meet Karl Hellwig at a court hearing in Germany in 1957. He is wearing grey slacks, a white and grey shirt, that immediately reminded me of the pajamas the Nazis forced concentration camps inmates to wear and a grey sleeveless cardigan. His tie and socks are pink and so are his handcuffs. Cowering on a chair he is questioned about a young man he had taken to his flat one night. The invisible judge's voice booming through the room demanding to know who the boy was. Karl denies knowing anything about this person. He claims that guy was a stranger. Breaking the fourth wall Karl speaks now directly to the audience and explains he very well knows who his companion was that night. The reason he denies knowing him is simply that he wants to protect the young man. The court will sully Karl's character whatever he says, since they see him as someone deprived

Consensual homosexual acts had been criminalised in all parts of the new German Empire in 1871 under Act 175. This law was amended by the Nazis in 1935 to allow stronger punishment for even those who were only suspected of consensual homosexual acts. While the GDR reverted back to the old law in 1950, the FRG kept the Nazi-version until 1969.

Karl had been in several concentration camps during the NS regime after being convicted for homosexual acts in 1941. This meant he had already a criminal conviction for being gay. Unlike other victims of the Third Reich gay men did not receive compensation after the war as they were seen as criminals and homosexuality was not a protected characteristic. The Allies also were persecuting homosexuals and therefore did nothing to force the new republic to amend their laws.

We leave the courtroom to return to Karl's childhood. He joined the Scout movement when he was ten years old. He found it hard to get his badges until Heinz Krüger joined. They became best buddies and Heinz took Karl under his wing, helping him to learn the skills he needed to get his badges. Karl's family were communists so Karl never had celebrated Christmas. Heinz's mum invited him to celebrate Christmas with them. He enjoyed the carol singing and the special Christmas biscuits, after an old family recipe. It becomes clear that Karl has strong feelings for Heinz. Maybe he himself is unaware of this until one Christmas, when they are sixteen years old, Heinz's girlfriend Johanna turns up. Karl is distraught. Around this time Heinz stops coming to the Scouts. He has decided to join the Hitler Youth. Heinz's parents are upset about this, they are anti-fascist. Many years later Karl will find out that Heinz denounced his parents to the Gestapo.

Karl goes to Berlin and enjoys his new free lifestyle. Taking his cardigan off, he wears a snazzy waistcoat and puts on a grey top hat with a pink ribbon. The outfit is rounded off with a long pink pearl necklace and a martini glass. It is now 1932 and although Act 175 is still on the statutes it is rarely enforced. This allows for a liberal environment where

people can freely express their sexualities. Night clubs pop up all across the city. With a twinkle in his eye Karl tells us about a marvellous venue called the Fabulett and it's host Felix with his most gorgeous array of sparkly hats. Those who have seen Michael Trauffer's last show, know what he is talking about. The Nazis take power, the cabarets and clubs close. They have made lists of those men who frequented venues that we would call gay clubs these days. This is the basis of the infamous 'pink lists'.

Men on these lists are persecuted, imprisoned and tortured in the next years, including Karl. He takes his waistcoat off and the stripey shirt has a pink upside down triangle stuck on the left side of his chest. The sign for homosexuals in the Nazi camps. Karl remembers his first Christmas in Sachsenhausen. The men were forced to stand outside and sing Christmas Carols while looking at gallows with eight hanged men. Apparently, they tried to escape, but when Karl talks about his experiences in the concentration camp, it becomes very quickly clear that 'escape' was an excuse used whenever the SS wanted to just kill people.

While the outside of the camps are guarded by the SS, order on the inside is kept by other prisoners in return for privileges. The so-called Kapos. Until the NS regime a widely used term to describe the 'captain' of an organised group. To avoid strong groups forming across the ranks, Kapos were from a different group than the other prisoners and the Nazis used frequently criminals marked by their green upside down triangles. One of the Kapos takes a shine to Karl. He is called Peter and was a professional safe breaker in Hamburg. They start an affair. While Karl is not particularly interested in the Kapo it means extra rations, that could be the difference between life and death. When Karl is selected to get moved to Flossenbürg in 1942, Peter tries to prevent it. As a result he gets moved as well and all privileges for Karl stop.

Karl stays in Flossenbürg from 1942 until it is freed by the US Forces on 23rd April 1945. Like most prisoners in the liberated concentration camps he has nowhere to go and stays on. He tries to write letters to those he has known and cared for: his parents, Frau Krüger, Heinz even Peter. He realises he doesn't know what happened to them and where they are. He is utterly lonely. When gets back to his hometown at last, he learns his parents, committed communists, got deported in the early 40s. He roams the street aimlessly until he stands in front of the Krüger's house. Frau Krüger is there and even though it is summer, it is Christmas in his heart.

We are back in the courtroom. Karl gets two years prison as a repeat offender. There is not only his Nazi conviction from 1939, he was also tried in 1951 when he was given six months. His time in Nazi camps is not taken into account. In total he spent seven years of his life locked up simply for being gay.

He put on a large pink knitted cardigan. It is 1982 and Karl is now an old man who tries to get compensation as a victim of NS persecution. As Act 175 is still law in Germany, albeit decriminalised, his request is turned down. A disembodied voice tells us Karl died peacefully in his sleep on 23rd August 1991.

Act 175 was rescinded on on 10th June 1994. The German state apologised in 2002, the year after civil partnerships were introduced in Germany. The convictions for Act 175 weren't annulled until 2017, the year same sex marriages became law under the 'marriage for everyone' banner. Compensation was only paid in 2022. The youngest victims would have been in their 81st year by then, most were long dead.

The show ends with Michael unrolling a massive pink list with names of gay victims of the Third Reich in beautiful handwriting. While Karl is a fictitious character his experiences in the musical are a based on true stories. Stories of some of the men on the scroll.

This is a one man musical and Michael Trauffer has written not only the Book, but also the Music and Lyrics. The show reminds me of the way opera seria was constructed. The spoken text moves the story on and then we stop for a moment of reflection and deep emotions during a song. There are seven songs and two reprises that convey the intensity of Karl's inner life. The audience was so enthralled they stopped the show twice with applause. In this small venue Trauffer has to use backing tracks recorded by Sarah Morrison who was also responsible for the musical supervision. She had also carefully and diligently written the long pink list at the end of the show. It felt like a fitting monument.

A wonderful show with an important message, that should be seen especially by a younger generation who often have no idea of the horrible struggles gay men had to endure still fairly recently.

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