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The Pink List – King's Head Theatre | Review

By Chris Omaweng / August 7, 2024

There's a part of me that wonders whether I was meant to have enjoyed the show, given what it was about: Karl Hellwig (Michael Trauffer), born in 1916, lived a long and fruitful life but because of his sexual orientation he had been jailed repeatedly over the years, in a textbook example of 'the law is an ass'. That Karl was a fictional character was, frankly, ingenious, allowing Trauffer creative licence without being bogged down or constrained by the minutiae of what 'actually' happened to someone.

There is, of course, in the back of one's mind, whether some of the detail had been heightened or slightly over-dramatised, but such thoughts don't exactly linger given the treatment of homosexuals to this day in some parts of the world.

Trauffer's narrative is careful to emphasise happier aspects of Karl's life so as not to make the show too relentlessly depressing: it's important, audience enjoyment aside, to note that there are shoots of hope and happiness even in the darkest of circumstances.



The Pink List at King's Head Theatre. Photo credit: Sarah Morrison

Some of the stories in this engaging story have an air of familiarity about them: when he is sent to a concentration camp during the Second World War (being gay was as 'filthy' in the eyes of the Third Reich as being Jewish), it is almost inevitable that there would be a close affinity very quickly established between inmates, and however bleak one's own personal situation is, there's always someone who has it worse. By way of example, Karl spent time in the 'Schuhläuferkommando' – the shoe testing commando at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where people were made to march all day, often in shoes one or two sizes too small. An older man, clearly struggling, had asked for shoes in his own size. In typical SS style, his request was flatly denied.

It is the lingering illegality of homosexuality – and its enforcement – Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code was only partially repealed in 1969 and fully repealed in 1994 – that had an impact on Karl, and many others like him. One of the most harrowing scenes comes decades after the end of the Nazi regime, when a letter arrives telling him his request for compensation has been denied on various technicalities, one of which, quite extraordinarily, was about his time in concentration camps (yes, plural) being irrelevant to his compensation claim because he was not indicted or convicted of any crime by way of judicial process.

The production was staged on an 8ft x 6ft platform, great for incarceration scenes, not so great for portraying travelling around after the end of World War Two to try to discover if any of his friends and family are still living at home, or if they even have homes. This was, to me, more of a play with songs rather than a musical, but then perhaps it goes with the overall narrative of Karl never really be able to go full blown *La Cage aux Folles* and express himself because of the ever-lingering threat of further punishment.

With various key moments explained, no prior knowledge of the politics and legal system in post-war West Germany is required. This enlightening and intelligent production tells an important and often overlooked aspect of modern history.



Review by Chris Omaweng

1957, West Germany. The battle against the Nazis ended 12 years ago, but the war against injustice rages on.

Karl, a gay concentration camp survivor, stands trial for the “crime” of loving another man. While most laws have been denazified, the Nazi-era law persecuting homosexuals remains in force, making men like Karl perpetual offenders rather than recognised victims.

The Pink List, a one-person musical inspired by the untold stories of gay men in postwar Germany, takes its name from the lists created by the Nazis to track and target gay men – lists that were still used by the German police in post-war years. This thought-provoking work sheds light on the struggle for recognition in a society that refused to acknowledge the suffering endured by the persecuted.

Creator and Performer – Michael Trauffer (he/him)

Additional Creation and Musical Supervision – Sarah Morrison (she/her)

THE PINK LIST

King's Head Theatre

5, 11 and 13 August 2024

Author



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Chris has been reviewing for LondonTheatre1 since 2014. He has had a range of jobs in his working career across higher education, membership organisations and the private sector, and is currently administrator and office manager at the American International Church on Tottenham Court Road, a popular audition and rehearsal space for theatre companies. He is an associate member of the Institute of Administrative Management and a member of the drama section of the Critics' Circle.

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