



BFI FLARE

Bent

+ Q&A with director Sean Mathias, writer Martin Sherman and actor Ian McKellen

Contains strong violence and upsetting scenes.

One night in 1930s Berlin, a promiscuous gay man Max (Clive Owen) makes a decision that puts him and his boyfriend in great danger, forcing them to flee the city. Sean Mathias's adaptation of Martin Sherman's Tony-nominated play is a heartrending story of the persecution of gay people in Nazi Germany.

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In their quest for a racial purity purged of corrupting influences, the Nazis industrialised degradation, torture and murder. To make their prison camps into death factories mass-producing corpses necessitated an element of mob psychology, and that makes Nazism difficult to represent through individual encounters. The larger cruelty can only be glimpsed through smaller acts of brutality, perpetuated, as in *Bent* by types rather than characters. One corrupt camp commandant stands for a whole regime of murder. (It's revealing that one of the most painful fictional accounts of the concentration camps, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, is a comic featuring cartoon mice: not much realism there.)

Realism's need to personalise gives rise to the set of signals which regularly stand for Nazi inhumanity: here, jackboots, belts tightly cinched round leather great coats, chiselled jawlines, and a cool, clear gaze prefiguring bullying sadism. It's to the credit of *Bent* that it's fully aware how closely that iconography approximates certain homoerotic images. These Nazis are beautiful pin-ups made flesh, yet they yield their power with consummate cruelty. We get a real sense of the salivating prurience just beneath the surface of their intolerance of another sexuality.

Martin Sherman's adaptation of his own 1979 play retains a theatricality, but the movie is in no way constrained by that, repeatedly breaking free to enter a realm of painfully hallucinatory spaces. If director Sean Mathias encloses most of the action in tightly framed verbal encounters, the effect is all the greater when the screen does open up. The seething, tainted sensuality of Greta's club is conventionally contrived, but there's a weird air of carnival, or at least circus about it, only heightened by the sight of Mick Jagger in drag singing from a trapeze. Jagger's presence may be a commercial sop, but his eerie transformation from the dangerous figure of Greta to the utterly safe George produces a neat cameo that Mathias is at pains not to overplay.

The movie's arresting imagery is nowhere more apparent than when protagonist Max is carrying rocks from one pile to another and back. Prisons are usually represented as claustrophobic, but here we feel, in an almost physical way, the sheer belittling pointlessness of Max's solitary labour as the camera finds his tiny figure in the distance, trudging endlessly back and forth in a vast monochrome chamber, a disused furnace, I'd guess, here standing in for who knows what bleak prison facility. In fact, Mathias repeatedly makes telling use of modern industrial wasteland as a visual correlative of the shattered fabric of Nazi Germany.

Perhaps less convincing is the script's suggestion that the Nazis' persecution of gays was even more vicious than their anti-Semitism. In this context,

establishing a hierarchy becomes all but meaningless. Perhaps it's a narrative device to allow Max to appear in a less than flattering light: after masquerading as a Jew to avoid the worse treatment, he finally comes out in the most painful way.

As Max, Clive Owen has the onanistic insouciance of the sex object, but he's not quite so convincing as a prisoner: a shaven head and sunken cheeks suit him rather too well. Lothaire Bluteau, on the other hand, is remarkable, his features charged with rodent intensity, notably when Horst and Max bring each other to orgasm in the prison yard, neither man touching the other, or indeed, himself. At such moments, Nazi persecution slips gently into the background, to be replaced by an extraordinary love story. It's no disgrace that *Bent* renders that story as movingly as it reminds us of the depths of Nazi hatred.

Nick Kimberly, *Sight & Sound*, March 1998

BENT

Director: Sean Mathias
Production Companies: Channel Four Television Corporation, Nippon Film Development & Finance, Channel 4 Films, Ask Kodansha Co, Arts Council of England
Executive Producers: Sarah Radclyffe, Hisami Kuroiwa
Producers: Michael Solinger, Dixie Linder
Co-producers: Sean Mathias, Martin Sherman
Production Supervisor: Gina Carter
Production Co-ordinator: Sophie Fante
Location Manager: Michael Harm
Post-production Supervisor, re-cut: Christian Martin *
1st Assistant Director: Davina Nicholson
Script Supervisor: Liz West
Casting Director: Andy Pryor
Screenplay/Original Play: Martin Sherman
Director of Photography: Giorgos Arvanitis
Steadicam Operator: Roger Tooley
Effects Producer: Alan Church
Effects Composer: Matthew Twyford
Visual Effects Supervisor: Frédéric Moreau
Special Effects: John Markwell
Editor: Isabel Lorente
Production Designer: Stephen Brimson Lewis
Art Director: Andrew Golding
Costume Designer: Stewart Meachem
Chief Make-up Artist: Trefor Proud
Chief Hairdresser: Sarah Love
Titles Designer: Simon Giles
Digital Opticals/Titles: Film Factory at VTR
Music: Philip Glass
Featuring: The Emerson String Quartet
Violins: Eugene Drucker, Philip Setzer
Viola: Lawrence Dutton
Cello: David Finckel
Solo Piano: Michael Riesman
Cello Additional Soloist: David Finckel
Violin Additional Soloist: Phil Setzer
Clarinet Additional Soloist: Andrew Sterman
Conductor: Michael Riesman
Choreography: Wayne McGregor
Sound Recording: Simon Bishop
Re-recording Mixers: Paul Carr, Robert Farr
Sound Editor: Gerard McCann
Stunt Co-ordinator: Tom Delmar
Animal Handler: Dave Stewart

Cast

Lothaire Bluteau (*Horst*)
Clive Owen (*Max*)
Brian Webber (*Rudy*)
Ian McKellen (*Uncle Freddie*)
Mick Jagger (*Greta/George*)
Nikolaj Waldau (*Wolf*)
Jude Law (*stormtrooper*)
Gresby Nash (*waiter*)
Suzanne Bertish (*half-woman, half-man*)
David Meyer (*Gestapo man*)
Stefan Marling (*SS Captain*)
Richard Laing, Crispian Belfrage (*SS guards*)
Johanna Kirby (*muttering woman*)
David Phelan (*fluff in park*)
Peter Stark (*guard on train 1*)
Rupert Graves (*officer on train*)
Charlie Watts (*guard on train 2*)
Holly Davidson (*girl on train*)
Rupert Penry Jones (*guard on road*)
Paul Kynman (*corporal*)
Paul Bettany (*captain*)
Claire Cunningham, Shira Haviv, Filip van Huffel, Sacha Lee, Ben Maher, Jane Mason (*Random Dance Companies*)
Nat (*flame throwing man*)
Packer (*happy sad man*)
Ernesto (*leaping man*)
Myer Taub (*Rudy's dresser*)
Geraldine Sherman, Rachel Weisz (*prostitutes*)
Mary Davidson, Sadie Frost, Lou Gish, Simon Hammerstein, Johan Johnstone, Chris Karlitz, Mark Misauer, Howard Sacks, Mandy Stone, William Stone, Daisy de Villeneuve, Poppy de Villeneuve, Jan de Villeneuve, Helen Whitehouse, Zed (*Max's friends*)

UK/USA/Japan 1996©
116 mins

* Uncredited

BFI
FLARE
LGBTIQ+ FILM & EVENTS

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