

A Bright Room Called Day

Director's Note

A Bright Room Called Day is a complex piece. Historical events drive this story, but the characters onstage are not historical figures. Theatre is about action, but this play is about inaction. The play happens primarily in the 1930s, but is linked to the current events of the time it was written.

So, how can a story that roots itself in the world of the late 1980s have a shelf life that keeps it fresh for an audience in 2018?

When *Bright Room* premiered in the late 80s, it was called many things, the most noteworthy being "immature." The playwright, Tony Kushner, did not debate this point. What many took issue with was one of the character's comparisons between Ronald Reagan and Adolf Hitler. This was an over zealous, irresponsible false equivalency for many, especially during the height of Reagan's popularity. I think most fair-minded people would agree that a comparison of the two men is not at all analogous. However, Kushner's issue was more about the inconsistencies with the nature of comparative history.

Debates like this invariably cause offense. That's not the goal, rather a symptom of discussion. It's endemic to the contemporary theatrical experience. I believe that contemporary theatre intends to shine a light on areas of society that have fallen into the darkness of our social consciousness. In this case, the light is illuminating the concept of civil discussion. We don't debate anymore. In today's society of social media and anonymous comments, debate is discouraged. To give an inch is to give a mile and the necessary discussion that bridges social divides is instead reduced to trench warfare.

One of the most enduring moments of the play is when the "contemporary" character debates the usefulness of Hitler and his policies as the standard of absolute evil. Her belief is that if nothing compares to the standard, and we forbid anything to be measured against it, then the standard becomes meaningless. If nothing is comparable, how do we place it within the greater historical context?

Last semester, the department produced a play about the extermination of the Herrero tribe in Africa at the hands of the German military. Does that historical reality not belong on the same scale Hitler and his final solution is weighing down? What about the great purge of Stalin, which resulted in the deaths of 20 million people, conservatively 2 million more deaths than the Holocaust? Is it just about numbers? Consider Andrew Jackson's trail of tears and the United States' treatment of Native Americans. How does that compare? What about the death and dehumanization of slavery, our national shame? Is that in any way homologous to this other historical nightmare? How about our government's callous dismissal of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s? No it wasn't a purposeful extermination, but is it really out of place to debate the similarities between the idea of social supremacy in the allocation of governmental funding, an early hallmark of the Nazi government in its approach to Judaism, socialism and homosexuality? Perhaps funding is too

tangential to the central argument. It's about the belief that one group is morally deficient to the masses and must be separated or sequestered due to the inherent "danger" they represent with their "otherness." Maybe a better comparison would be banning members of a certain religious group, say Islam, from entering a country.

This play makes an argument to jumpstart debate. Kushner believes that it's not about proving his point to be accurate, but about forcing two sides to come together to debate that point. Discussion is always a good thing. While you may not agree with the points made in this play, there is no doubt that they will engender a dialogue.

We are asking a lot of the audience in watching this piece and dispassionately digesting its ideas. But regardless of your thoughts on the thematic debate, we hope this play moves you. We hope it moves you to re-examine your beliefs, or perhaps to strengthen your convictions. Regardless, I hope this play has some enduring presence in the lives of all who see it. On behalf of this incredible cast and creative team, I hope you enjoy *A Bright Room Called Day*.