

Dear President Steven Lavine, Jeannene and Don,

I am writing to you to celebrate the initiative of a singular CalArts student, Jeffrey Scott Basham, BFA 4 Actor and the company of CalArts Theater School artists (including Fran Bennett as director) that he has rallied to his vision. Jeffrey is the Executive Producer and lead actor in a Coffeehouse production of an enduring play, BENT, by Martin Sherman. This production is a watershed moment for CalArts because it is the first time an openly gay theater student has rallied a cohort (many of whom are also openly gay) around creating work at CalArts as a stance on LGBT rights. BENT brilliantly dramatizes the evils of prejudice and persecution.

The production of BENT also speaks to the value and success of CalArts Diversity Grant, which helped fund Jeffrey's project.

I saw the Broadway production when I was a graduate student at the Yale Drama School, this CalArts production is every bit its equal and more for the spirit and passion that brought it into existence. This intimate Coffeehouse Theater production is as seJeffreyng in its effect for its harrowing capture of a time and place of such unmitigated cruelty - Nazi Germany.

With a tiny budget and a minimum of design elements Fran has created with her company of student artists the authentic world of the play. The costumes in particular - by MFA 2 costume designer, David Moyer (who made the remarkably true camp uniforms) are just very special and psychologically on point. It is David's research that greets us outside the theater to set the scene. The performances are devastatingly truthful. I was truly overcome by the depth of acting and the emotional rawness of this work - the physicality. Jeffrey's personal trajectory over the time I have known him mount the herculean effort to get this play off the ground - with the able support of Kaitlin Cornuelle (BFA 4 Actor) as co-producer, stage manager and production manager - has mirrored the growth in consciousness and compassion that his character Max experiences onstage.

This project began with the BFA 1 studio year - when Jeffrey and James Cowan (BFA 4 Actor) took on a scene from BENT and brought this work into Fran Bennett's voice class. Three years later, in his final year, Jeffrey asked Fran to direct him and James in a production of the play. Fran agreed under the condition Jeffrey had to fully produce the show himself: cast the actors; select and engage the design and production team; create a budget and secure funding; market and promote the show. Jeffrey agreed to Fran's conditions with alacrity, but with some, understandable, apprehension. So with a minimum of late night techs, Sunday rehearsals and with results from fundraising

and a website in place, we have come full circle to good measure. BENT was mounted and is up and running. Quite an accomplishment.

I worked with Jeffrey in Entrepreneurship to reach out to his "real world" constituencies: the LGBT community of Los Angeles, The Museum of Tolerance and the Skirball Center. I am so pleased to report to you that last night, opening night, there were invitees from the Museum of Tolerance and the Skirball Center in the audience, who were very taken with the performance. Jeffrey's mother was also there. She travelled to see Jeffrey's remarkable achievement as both an actor and producer. I tried to imagine not only the pride she must feel in her son's enterprise but awe at his artistic mastery. It is so important that we maintain these outlets for student-produced work and so significant that a faculty member of Fran's stature and respect will not only give of her time so generously, but will demand such accomplished results. There is a BFA 1 actor Joseph Tanner Paul playing a Nazi Guard to chilling effect here. Who knows what Joseph will offer us when he is a BFA 4.

We are all so busy, productions like BENT fall so easily under the radar. But BENT, like the work of The Collective, is making an enormous contribution to the expression of constituent diversities at CalArts. I think it would be a special treat for you to see a student initiative of such commitment, power, heart, artistry and value.

BENT in the Coffeehouse:

Tonight at 8:00

Sunday at 2:00 and 8:00

Just show up. Jeffrey and Kaitlin will make sure that there are seats for you.

Thank you,
Susan Solt