

Los Angeles Times

THEATER REVIEW

An Illness in the Family : Dean Bruggeman's 'Show and Tell' brings kitsch to AIDS stage productions. The acting is operatic--as in soap.

July 22, 1994 | ROBERT KOEHLER | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES; *Robert Koehler writes frequently about theater for The Times.*

NORTH HOLLYWOOD — In his essay in the July issue of Harper's magazine, writer Daniel Harris muses on the myriad forms of AIDS-themed kitsch--from books to posters to ads--which have served to make the disease palatable to Middle America.

"AIDS has been so thoroughly sentimentalized," writes Harris, "that it inspires such publicity stunts as Elton John flying Ryan White to Disneyland or Miss America haunting AIDS wards..."

Interestingly, Harris doesn't mention plays. For the most part, theater has not only resisted AIDS kitsch, but has confronted it imaginatively ("Angels in America") and viscerally ("The Destiny of Me").

There are, alas, exceptions.

Daniel Harris, meet Dean Farell Bruggeman, who breaks some kind of AIDS kitsch sound barrier with his new play, "Show and Tell," at Group Repertory Theatre.

Considering that Bruggeman fills the stage with gallons of bathos, it's amazing that his hero, Michael (Brent Gettelfinger), is never actually sick with AIDS. The melodramatic limits are burst with his HIV-positive status alone. The kitsch here couldn't have possibly contained the progressed disease.

Actually, Bruggeman does introduce--awkwardly--Michael's AIDS-stricken friend, Richie (Michael Reid Mackay) as a way of rudely alerting Michael's mother (Lynn Cartwright) to the realities of the sickness. (We are in San Francisco, circa 1986.)

In the best cliched tradition, Richie is first the "queen"-like comic relief, then second the "Pieta"-like figure wasting away in Michael's arms. Richie is Michael's kitschy future.

For the present, Michael must deal initially with his lawyer sister Samantha (Shauna Bloom), who resents that it took spotting his "Living With AIDS" book to find out the truth.

Then he must deal with Mom, who erupts with verbal venom when Michael painfully tells his folks. Dad, played stoically by Dom Salinaro, is miraculously understanding.

“Show and Tell” quickly becomes a let’s-hate-Mom play--a weird companion to the let’s-hate-Dad plays of the ‘60s.

Because Bruggeman never really grounds his characters in anything other than what they do for a living, he can’t provide a plausible reason for Mom’s wrath and Dad’s benevolence: Both are too extremely depicted, and both go too much against the norm of many gay male AIDS patient histories, in which the fathers often struggle the most with the sons’ fates.

The perversity of this familial reaction simply blows away any other issue in the play, though Bruggeman didn’t intend it that way.

The play fortunately resists the easy, politically correct notion that family is what you make it, and Bruggeman seems to construct his drama to disprove Michael’s early notion that blood is not thicker than water. Michael must finally accept his blood ties--meaning Mom.

The acting steps on the borderline of soap opera, and sometimes, as with Greg Gloede as Michael’s loyal lover, Travis, crosses over.

Gettelfinger and Bloom work hard to yank things from soap to reality, but Cartwright and Mackay yank it back the other way.

Far in the background, Jeff Keel delivers the most interesting performance as the most surprising character--Conner, Samantha’s newfound, easygoing boyfriend.

Set designers Malcom Atterbury Jr. and Sebastian Milito clearly know the feel of an upscale San Francisco apartment, but flub things by putting a futon in Mom and Dad’s living room. Dan Weingarten’s lights are TV-style bright, but nothing here out-kitsches Paul Cady’s treacly piano music.

WHERE AND WHEN

What: “Show and Tell.”

Location: Group Repertory Theatre, 10900 Burbank Blvd., North Hollywood.

Hours: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. 3 p.m. Sundays.

Price: \$10 to \$12.

Call: (818) 769-7529.