

Doin' What Comes Naturally

Playwright David Stevens Shows Gay Life Without the Angst

BY GERARD RAYMOND

David Stevens's *The Sum of Us*, one of the biggest off-Broadway hits in New York this season, is a gay play that is refreshingly different. There is no coming-out

trauma or parental rejection in this drama. Here, a father walks into his gay son's bedroom in the morning to ask how the night's catch takes his tea.

Stevens says his play, which is set in present-day Australia, is an attempt to explore what happens *after* someone comes out. Only too aware that there is a dearth of positive gay characters onstage, Stevens says he deliberately set out to write a gay role model in the character of the son. The playwright's relationship with his own father wasn't anything like the chummy one portrayed in the play, however.

"My father thought a handshake was homosexual activity," Stevens quips. Still, the writer drew on many real-life situations for *The Sum of Us*. "It is an insult to the many, many parents of gays who come to terms with their children's sexuality to doubt that such a relationship could exist," Stevens insists. "My own lover's parents, for instance, are exactly as accepting as the father I've put onstage."



David Stevens

At the end of the play, the father has a stroke and his son nurses him. "It is a direct parallel with the AIDS situation," Stevens explains. "I have lost only one very close friend to AIDS, and the only way I could face the issue was from a David Stevens perspective

and not from a political perspective. I have the homosexual, healthy son looking after the incapacitated father."

Stevens, who lives in California with his lover of three years, is best known as the director of the television series *A Town Called Alice*. His unconventional take on gay life in *The Sum of Us*, his first play, might have something to do with his unique background.



All in the family

Tony Goldwyn (left) and Richard Venture as a gay son and his understanding dad in *The Sum of Us*.

A naturalized Australian since 1974, Stevens was born "over 45 years ago" in Palestine (today part of Israel). He enjoyed a "blessed childhood" in nearby Jordan, living in "the warm shadow of Islam." From the age of 12 until he left the country four years later, Stevens had a lover, whom he met on the first day of school.

"We drifted *naturally* into a sex and love relationship," he says. "But we had no idea what love was; we were just best friends." Because the Koran forbids extramarital sex with women on pain of death, Stevens explains that most sexually active Middle Eastern young men lean toward bisexuality. "It isn't just a matter of getting your rocks off, because out of this, deep friendships develop."

Stevens has been exposed to natural, unprejudiced expressions of homosexuality all his life. He remembers seeing his lesbian

grandmother and her lover asleep in each other's arms when he was 6 years old. But he received a "rude shock to his system" when he moved to England at 16, running "full tilt into English puritanism." While enrolled at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, he had a close group of friends but didn't discuss his sexuality with them "because they didn't discuss theirs." When these friends learned that Stevens was gay,

they ostracized him for months.

An affair with an Australian who had "a sunshine approach to life" convinced Stevens that he should move down under, which he eventually did. "My play is really a love song to Australia," Stevens admits, explaining that he has met "some extraordinary openness and affection in the out-back and in the working-class areas of Melbourne."

Despite his play's glowing reviews and near-capacity audiences, Stevens has felt the ire of a "core group of gay militants." These critics have problems with *The Sum of Us*, he suggests, because a gay play that doesn't threaten straights cannot be politically correct in their view. But like the young man in the play who is happy playing football with his straight mates, Stevens claims, "I don't want to live in a world that begins and ends with being gay." ▼

CAROL ROSEGG/MARTHA SWOPE ASSOCIATES