

t h e a t e r

# Championship season

Playwright Richard Greenberg talks about bringing his hot-button gay baseball play, *Take Me Out*, to Broadway **By Gerard Raymond**



A winning team: Greenberg (with glasses) and the cast of *Take Me Out*, his play in which Daniel Sunjata (opposite) portrays a gay baseball player.

**H**ow does it feel to have written the gay play of the year? Richard Greenberg seems genuinely taken aback by the question. "Have I?" asks the author of such witty and articulate theatrical experiences as *Eastern Standard* and *Three Days of Rain*. "If I have, that's thrilling."

Greenberg's new play, *Take Me Out*—the much talked-about gay baseball drama that moves to Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre in February—has certainly been thrilling audiences for much of the past year. The production, directed by Joe Mantello, premiered in London last summer and then enjoyed a sold-out run at New York City's Joseph Papp Public Theater in the fall. Yet Greenberg wrote the show not to

spark discussion about gays in sports but because three years ago he'd been hopelessly smitten—with baseball.

"It truly is like falling in love—the emotional quality; it has that sort of exclusiveness," says Greenberg. "I used to think my father and brother were absurd [for being fans]. Now I have turned into one of those people who screams in a room. I always felt alienated in groups; this was the first crowd I ever agreed with. It was like finding a community for the first time."

Greenberg found a way to dramatize his new love after following the media coverage of Billy Bean, the former major leaguer who came out in 1999. In Greenberg's play a star player outs himself while at the peak of his career. "The idea of a gay character was vital

to make me feel that this material could be specifically mine," says the playwright. Yet Greenberg wasn't interested in the kind of coming-out story where the center fielder falls in love with the catcher: "The romance, for me, was much bigger than that."

At the time Greenberg started writing *Take Me Out*, relief pitcher John Rocker gave an interview to *Sports Illustrated* making antigay and racist remarks. Greenberg's valentine to the ball game acquired a new dimension. "You can't write about baseball and not write about race," he says. Greenberg's protagonist is biracial and claims he has more of a libido for baseball than for sex. "I wanted him to have as complex an identity as possible, and I wanted any one definition of him to be incomplete," the

CAST: IMAGE DIRECT: SUNJATA: ANDREW KIST





playwright says. Just as his lead character argues he is both black and white, Greenberg says that *Take Me Out* is both a gay play and a baseball play. "They are ideas that may seem contradictory or separate, but they don't have to be. Maybe that's the point."

Contrary to Bean's contention that coming out would force a player out of the game, *Take Me Out's* baseball star suffers no career damage. "The 'enlightened' players now feel it's party line to say they'd be fine with it, which I think in itself is an advance," says Greenberg. Indeed, his play premiered while news about New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza's gay-friendly declaration of heterosexuality was still fresh.

Nevertheless, the ballplayer's revelation in the play does cause a great deal of discord within his team. "I think baseball may be one of the last realms [in which there are no out gays] because it tampers with people's nostalgia," Greenberg says. "There is an optimistic assumption that if we can all just name ourselves, everything will work out. But how does someone who doesn't know who he is identify himself?"

Greenberg also points out that a stage play is appropriate to the emotions of the game. "With very few exceptions, nothing tragic happens in baseball, but it works like tragedy," he says. "When you have lost the World Series, you experience actual grief. [The game] enables you somehow to give form to an emotion that might otherwise be formless or to arouse an emotion that might otherwise remain latent. It really has power like theater." ■

*Raymond is a New York-based writer.*



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