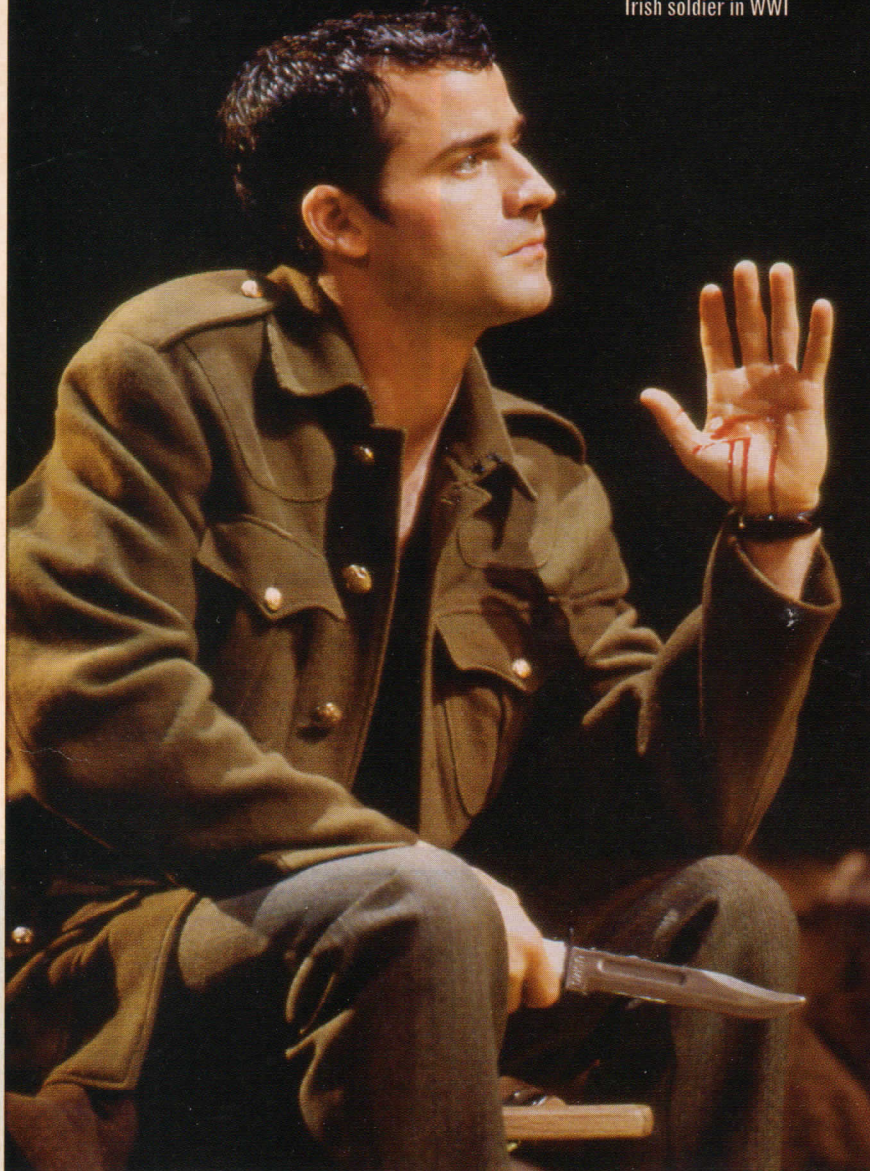


Justin Theroux as a gay Irish soldier in WWI



t h e a t e r

Gays and the military

In *Sons of Ulster* a gay lad finds love in the trenches of World War I. The play's director, Nicholas Martin, talks about balancing tragedy with good Irish humor **By Gerard Raymond**

I've been accused in productions of leaning a little heavily on the humor in the plays," admits stage director Nicholas Martin cheerfully. "After I did a production of *The Royal Family*, my pal Campbell Scott said, 'Your plays always start with one big joke and end with someone dying.' I never thought about it like that, but that's almost a definition of what I think life is."

After a 30-year stint as a journeyman actor and another spell as a teacher, Martin has found his true vocation in the past decade as a theater director. He's had a string of successful productions that includes works by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Laurents, Albert Innaurato, Christopher Durang, Jon Robin Baitz, and others. His breakthrough show—Jonathan Marc Sherman's *Sophistry* at New York's Playwrights Horizons in 1993—helped launch the careers of a number of relative newcomers who have since made their names in film and television: Ethan Hawke, Calista Flockhart, Steve Zahn, and Anthony Rapp.

Sophistry also established Martin's reputation for having excellent rapport with young actors. He gave *Party of Five*'s Scott Wolf his first professional stage role—in the Williamstown, Mass., production of *Dead End*—and while teaching at Vermont's Bennington College set Justin Theroux (*The Broken Hearts Club*) on his path as an actor.

Wolf and Theroux are both part of the cast of Martin's latest, a World War I play by Tony-nominated Irish playwright Frank McGuinness that luxuriates in the lengthy title *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. The show opens February 24 at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theater in New York, after acclaimed runs in Williamstown and at Boston's Huntington Theatre—productions that also featured Wolf and Theroux. "I have a real paternal relationship with these guys," Martin says.

Sons of Ulster tells the story of a platoon of Northern Irish lads who volunteer to fight in one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War. "It takes this monumental tragedy and gives you the smallest canvas of it: the most intimate lives of these seven young men," Martin explains. "How they learn to

THE ROUX: CAROL ROSEGG; MARTIN: HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY

bond and how they go to their deaths is incredibly moving and important." He pauses, then adds, "Also, I should say, it is an Irish play, which means there is humor."

In his three decades as an actor, Martin says he never achieved anything like the status he now has as a director. "I was funny but not really good enough. Also, I was a little too gay for mass media," he says. A member of the second company of the landmark *The Boys in the Band*, Martin reports that he was always out as an actor: "I sort of miss the great gay market as an actor. There was a kind of freedom to be gay, especially in the '70s."

Today, Martin says, straight actors are drawn to gay parts because "they recognize that frequently the gay part is the most interesting." The character Theroux plays in *Sons of Ulster*, for ex-



Once an out actor, Martin now directs theater.

ample, is gay and is the most complicated of the young men in the story. "He joins the army because he wants to die in the war," Martin explains, "and then meets a young blacksmith and falls in love and has a reason to live."

Martin himself is single now but likes to think the full life he has lived informs his work as a director. "I can't put it into cooking anymore, and I can't put it into kissing anymore, but you can see it onstage at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater," he says with a hearty laugh. ■

Raymond writes on theater and film and lives in New York City.



Find a longer version of this profile of theater director Nicholas Martin at www.advocate.com

t h e a t e r r e v i e w

Shanghai surprise

In *Shanghai Moon* drag master Charles Busch spoofs those hokey old "mysteries of the Orient" movies **By Don Shewey**

Shanghai Moon ■ Written by Charles Busch ■ Directed by Carl Andress ■ Starring Busch and B.D. Wong ■ The Drama Dept. at Greenwich House Theater, New York City (through March 9)

Charles Busch is a unique presence on the American cultural landscape. Two years ago he won a Tony nomination for writing *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, the long-running comedy that starred Linda Lavin on Broadway and then toured the country with Valerie Harper in the title role. Last year he achieved his lifelong dream of playing a leading female part in a movie with his self-penned *Die Mommie Die*, which recently had its world premiere at the high-powered Sundance Film Festival. Busch has written a new book for Boy George's London hit musical, *Taboo*, which Rosie O'Donnell is producing on Broadway this spring. Meanwhile, he remains devoted to his first love, which is performing onstage as a drag diva in self-written plays that simultaneously satirize and celebrate the old movies he grew up watching on TV.

Shanghai Moon, his latest vehicle, parodies a peculiar pocket of early B-movies in which brassy American dames rubbed up against period stereotypes of "the mysterious Orient." Busch portrays Lady Sylvia Allington, who arrives in China with her husband, the British consul. She is met by the suave General Gong Fei and his staff: the ancient Dr. Wu and the beautiful young astrologer Mah Li, who loves Gong Fei. A comic melodrama, the play hurtles through a zillion plot twists involving a priceless jade Buddha, drug smuggling, false identities, and suicide by chrysanthemum sniffing.



Wong is right: Busch and his *Shanghai* costar

The jokey script and Carl Andress's highly stylized production exemplify state-of-the-art camp, the form of failed seriousness in which the gap between intention and execution is exaggerated for comic effect. Busch has always cultivated a tongue-in-cheek distance from his roles, and you see all the layers here: a man playing some version of Barbara Stanwyck or Mae West who is in turn playing a ludicrously overblown character.

Busch the writer gives Busch the actor deliciously outrageous stuff to do, such as an opium-fueled dream sequence that allows him to perform a hoochie-coochie dance in a tiara-topped outfit and a courtroom scene in which a bare butt is the best defense. He is surrounded by some very good actors, most notably B.D. Wong as Gong Fei, hilarious whenever he turns out to the audience to intone any Chinese name (and breathtaking when he strips to the waist). Close in spirit to the work of Charles Ludlam's late lamented Ridiculous Theatrical Company, *Shanghai Moon* skillfully jumbles together the conventions of stage and screen, silly vaudeville, and kids' play. ■

Shewey writes on theater for The New York Times.