

t h e a t e r

Directing Marlene

Sean Mathias talks about bringing the legend of Dietrich to the Broadway stage **By Gerard Raymond**

“Marlene Dietrich was the original performance artist,” declares Sean Mathias. “Without Marlene, you couldn’t have had David Bowie or Madonna.” The Welsh-born director—best known stateside for his controversial 1997 movie version of *Bent*—is now helping to bring Dietrich’s artistry to a new generation with *Marlene*, a new Broadway production about the legendary screen goddess and performer.

Sean Mathias (above) and star Siân Phillips (right) collaborated to bring *Marlene* to life.

Mathias was invited to direct *Marlene* by its star, British theater diva Siân Phillips, who initiated the project after being told by many people that she looks and sounds like Dietrich. Phillips asked Pam Gems (who had previously written *Piaf*) to write the show for her. Then she handed the script to Mathias, a trusted collaborator who has directed her in such productions as an award-winning London revival of Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* starring Judi Dench. “Working with Sean is wonderful,” Phillips says. “He brings vision, wit, and intelligence to all he does.”

With Mathias’s help, Phillips recreates a version of the one-woman show with which Dietrich toured the world during her later years, singing the famous standards “Lili Marlene” and, of course, “that song,” as Dietrich calls it, “Falling in Love Again.”

Mathias says he was intrigued by the impressionistic nature of the piece. *Marlene* takes place in Paris on the night of a Dietrich concert. The first



X. MARTIN/JET SET/DENIS TARANTO

part is backstage drama; the second, Dietrich’s performance. It’s part one-woman show, part play, and part cabaret. “It says a lot about what it is to be a woman in a man’s world,” Mathias explains. “I found it fascinating that Dietrich was such a perfectionist and was driven and motivated all her life in

order to be an independent woman.”

Mathias has achieved independent success himself since his salad days as an out-of-work actor in the late ’70s, when his claim to fame was being Ian McKellen’s lover. Mathias is now in a new relationship with a South African playwright, and his career has ►

Bent to rent

PETER MOUNTAIN



Lothaire Bluteau and Clive Owen in *Bent*

May 18 sees the video release of Sean Mathias's film adaptation of the gay Holocaust play *Bent* (Orion Home Video). Upon its theatrical release in 1997, *The Advocate's* Jan Stuart was impressed by both the opening "bacchanal of wartime decadence," featuring Mick Jagger in drag, and the "barrage of unfathomable ... abuse" that awaited its gay heroes (pictured) in a Nazi death camp.

blossomed. He scored a huge hit on both sides of the Atlantic with his exuberant production of Jean Cocteau's *Indiscretions*, which was nominated for nine Tony awards in 1995.

And what about McKellen? "Eleven years after we broke up, we are still best of friends," Mathias says, grinning. Proof of the friendship lies in the fact that Mathias was Sir Ian's date for this year's Academy Awards.

Always open about his sexuality, Mathias doesn't pull his punches when it comes to gay subject matter. *Bent*, Martin Sherman's wrenching drama of gay men in the Holocaust, caused American rating-board anxiety because of the sexual explicitness of one minor scene. "If we had dealt with clichés about gay people, it would have been easier," the director says, shrugging off the ratings furor that accompanied the U.S. release.

In the theater Mathias has, as he puts it, been "drawn inexorably to stories of difficult and intense relationships by tortured gay writers." In London he followed the Cocteau play with a production of *Design for Living*, in which he

gleefully mined the homoerotic subtext of Noël Coward's bourgeois comedy. Now, just days after *Marlene* opens in New York, Mathias's latest production, a revival of Tennessee Williams's rarely staged *Suddenly Last Summer*, will open in the West End.

Marlene also offers gay overtones with its acknowledgment of Dietrich's bisexuality. But that's merely one of the play's points. Echoing late theater critic Kenneth Tynan's famous remark that Dietrich had sex but no particular gender, Phillips says she has discovered that *Marlene's* appeal goes right across the board, transcending all categories. "Dietrich knew how to fascinate people," Phillips says, "and she made a study of it."

For Mathias, however, the primary aspect of Dietrich's appeal is unmistakable. "Her poem was herself—the way she stood there in that sheath of a dress, the eyelashes, and this wave of hair," he says. "She's a style queen, isn't she?" ■

Raymond is a freelance theater writer based in New York City.

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