

# STAGESCENE LA

STEVEN STANLEY'S STAGESCENELA.COM: SPOTLIGHTING THE BEST IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA THEATER

## ★★★★ RAVE REVIEW ★★★★★

**HOLDING THE MAN** Stage Scene LA - Steven Stanley The Aussies have set up shop at the Matrix Theatre as a troupe of L.A.-based actors from Down Under aptly-named the Australian Theatre Company present the Southern California Premiere of the true-life coming-of-age/coming-out/coming-to-terms-with-AIDS play *Holding The Man*, exciting news indeed for Angelinos in search of quality theater Ozzie-style. *Holding the Man* Based on Timothy Conigrave's memoir of the same name, *Holding The Man* proves a particularly fine choice for ATC's maiden effort, having already racked up over half-a-dozen major Australian productions (and one on London's West End), its inspiring story of gay love at the peak of the AIDS epidemic arriving simultaneously with Ryan Murphy's long-awaited screen adaptation of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, a recent smash for our very own Fountain Theatre. Timothy Murphy's skillful two-act adaptation of Conigrave's 300-plus-page book largely eschews Kramer's political agenda for the personal, but the results are no less gut-wrenching, though tear-wary audience members are guaranteed at the very least a full hour of joy and laughter before the reality of the 1980s sets in (sort of like how it was for those who lived through the heady days of gay lib only to have a plague test their grit and guts). *Holding the Man* Canberra native Nate Jones never leaves the stage in a charismatic star turn as Tim, whom we first glimpse as a nine-year-old taking one small step towards gayness with schoolmate Kevin even as astronaut Neil Armstrong (the first of Alex "Jürgen" Ferguson's terrific puppets) takes that "one giant step for mankind." Before long, it's teenage Tim who is breaking up with sort-of girlfriend Juliet by revealing to her his as-yet unrequited feelings for school football team captain John Caleo (Adam J. Yeend, the only other *Holding The Man* cast member to play a single role), whose "beautiful eyes, dark brown with these eyelashes" will continue to mesmerize Tim

for the rest of his life. Holding the Man\_5 It's thanks to Juliet's carefully planned seating plan at a small gathering of school friends ("We should pass a kiss around the table as a kind of bond...") that allows Tim and John their first smooch, and before long the sports star has agreed to "go round" (i.e. go out with) the aspiring student actor, a romance that soon becomes food for school gossip before leading to consequences on the homefront. Still, when Aussie boys are as much in love as Tim and John are, parental confusion and/or disapproval seems a small price to pay, "uni" life opening the boyfriends' eyes to the gay world around them in both student activist organizations and gay bars, and the couple are still going strong five years into their relationship. There is, unfortunately, the matter of Tim's roving eye (and cock), since unlike John, who'd be content if it were just the two of them on a desert island for the rest of their lives, the friskier of the two (and about to head off to acting school) finds himself losing his "identity" in their relationship and requests a "trial separation," i.e. the permission to fuck and suck to his dick's content. If only there weren't those rumors of a "gay

cancer" about to rear its ugly head. Holding the Man\_2 Before long, the reunited lovers find themselves confronting a challenge they could never have imagined in their teen years, nor could any of their mates now facing impending illness and death in the prime of their young lives.

Despite its "historical" time frame, not only is Holding The Man not at all passé in 2014, like the aforementioned The Normal Heart, it provides a vital history lesson to a generation of young gay men unaware of what life was like only a few decades back and a potent reminder of the potential consequences of unprotected sex in a "post-AIDS" world in which bareback sex finds itself increasingly normalized. Playwright Murphy has constructed Holding The Man as a sequence of short scenes moving lickety-split from one to the next, a quartet of supporting cast members dividing nearly three dozen featured and cameo roles among them, a technique that could easily—in less gifted hands than director Larry Moss's and the best-of-L.A. design team combining talents on the extra-wide Matrix stage—end up chaotic and confusing. Not so at the Matrix, for not only is acclaimed acting coach Moss an actors' director par excellence, his visual sense makes Holding The Man as imaginatively staged as it is brilliantly performed. Master scenic designer John Iacovelli's set is deceptively simple (straight-back chairs and a ladder on an otherwise empty black stage) but it is clearly an artist's design, the upstage wall cleverly concealing a series of character-defining wigs and knickknacks, though props are deliberately kept to a bare minimum. Lit to perfection by Jeremy Pivnick with sound designer Cricket S. Myers

tying scenes together with her accustomed expertise and Shon Le Blanc's period costumes (ingeniously accessorized for quick changes) completing the design package, Moss's razor-sharp vision for *Holding The Man* allows the production to rocket forward, with never a moment of boredom or confusion along the way. Maturing believably from precocious pre-teen to bushy-tailed high schooler to devil-may-care 20something to older-but-sadly-wiser adult, *Holding The Man* star Jones does not shy away from the warts-and-all nature of Conigrave's self-portrait, yet never does the young Aussie lose sight of Tim's humanity as time, events, and an actor's powerful work reveal the depth of a man's love and devotion despite early evidence to the contrary. Yeend is given considerably less to do as John, but what he does he does quite marvelously indeed, making Tim's need to stray a head-scratcher while at the same time making it easy to see why, when the chips are down, John is well worth any sacrifice that might be required of his lover.

*Holding the Man* As for the sensational *Down Under* quartet who bring the multitude of characters surrounding Tim and John to vibrant life, audience members can count themselves lucky to be making the acquaintance of silver-foxy Cameron Daddo, teen-idol-icious Luke O'Sullivan, girl-next-door captivating Adrienne Smith, and the simply stunning Roxane Wilson. Age/gender-bending to perfection in role after role after role, the foursome give us vivid vignettes of horny high school boys (the slumber party jerk-off sequence is a hoot), university queers, drama schoolers and staff, doctors, AIDS patients, and more queens than you'll find in any deck of cards. At one point the quartet even team together to play a car. That's right. A car! Daddo and Wilson deserve special snaps for creating two distinct sets of parents, O'Sullivan's turn as Juliet's mum is a particular keeper, and Smith gets extra points for acing her mostly male parts in addition to the lovely Juliet (Understudies James Monarski and Laura Pike merit a round of applause for undertaking the daunting challenge of covering every single role.) Last but not least, mention must be made of the use of Ferguson's life-size puppets in Act Two, an inspired playwright's concept executed with devastating power by Moss and company. *Holding The Man* is produced by Nick Hardcastle and Jones with Mike Abramson. Peter Blackburn is assistant director. Christopher Basile is stage manager and Angelo Domingo is assistant stage manager. Jackie Diamond is company manager. Jean-Louis Rodrigue is movement specialist. When I first got word of Australian Theatre Company three months ago, I knew in an instant that whatever else might be playing on Saturday May 10, I would cancel everything to be at the Matrix for Opening Night. Not only did *Holding The Man* fulfill my hopes and expectations, it exceeded them,

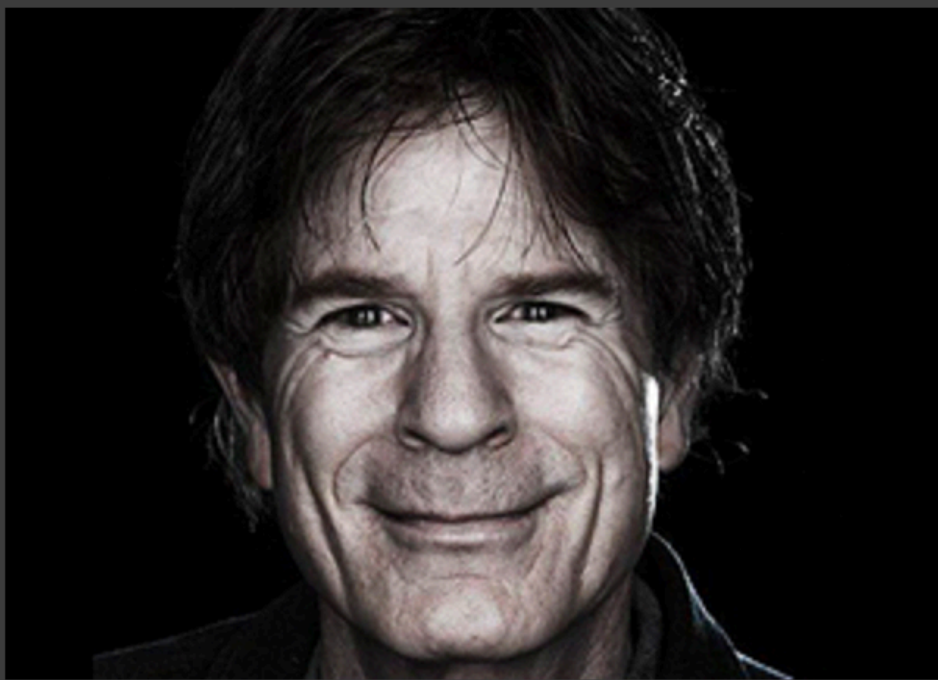
and they were high indeed. Welcome to Los Angeles, ACT. Stick around for a while. I can't wait to see what else you've got up your sleeves

Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles. Through June 29. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 3:00. Reservations: 323 960-7735  
www.holdingtheman.us

-Steven Stanley

May 10, 2014

Photos: Suzanne Strong



## ABOUT STEVEN STANLEY

As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. ([read more](#))