

# Review 'Holding the Man' a deeply personal exploration of the heart



A kissing game is the pretext through which obliging friends (Roxane Wilson, Adrienne Smith) help crush-stricken Tim (Nate Jones) break the ice with John (Adam J. Yeend) in "Holding the Man." (Suzanne Strong)

By **PHILIP BRANDES**

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**T**oday's evolving attitudes toward sexual equality may still be far from perfect, but for gays coming of age in the 1970s the stakes were very different. Forget about marriage rights or legal protections — a mere public admission of homosexuality was a far riskier proposition.

Hence the dual allusions of "Holding the Man," Australian actor and activist Timothy Conigrave's memoir; the title also references a soccer term for a penalty-incurring violation. The 2006 stage adaptation by Tommy Murphy now at the Matrix Theatre may not add revelatory insight to a crowded genre of gay-themed plays about that watershed period, but it's a particularly accomplished reminder of issues and challenges that still resonate.

This inaugural production from L.A.-based Australian Theatre Company traces the emotional roller

coaster of a fifteen-year love affair from the tongue-tied infatuation that introspective Tim Conigrave (Nate Jones) develops for John (Adam J. Yeend), the captain of their Catholic prep school soccer team.

The rock-solid lead performances don't flinch from Conigrave's unsparing concession of his own mercurial selfishness, and John's saintly influence that shapes Tim into a better and more likable man.

The dexterity with which the other members of this all-Aussie ensemble (Adrienne Smith, Roxane Wilson, Cameron Daddo, and Luke O'Sullivan) slip in and out of multiple characters of all ages and personalities are a credit to veteran acting coach Larry Moss' nuanced direction.

The sweetly touching tone in the early stages of Tim and John's on-again, off-again romance shifts abruptly to tragedy with the arrival of the villain in this and many other stories from that era — the emerging AIDS epidemic that knows no boundaries of nationality or fairness; stunning surreal puppetry in key moments drives the devastation home.

Despite inevitable comparisons with Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart," Conigrave's story steers clear of politics, focusing instead on the deeply personal exploration of a single heart.

**"Holding the Man,"** The Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends June 29. \$34.99. (323) 960-7735 or [www.holdingtheman.us](http://www.holdingtheman.us). Running time: 2 hours, 35 minutes.

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