

'Inheritance' examines the gay man experience in America with sweeping insight, passion

Epic might seem a fitting word to describe the season opener at Trinity Repertory Company because it implies grandiosity, but while *Inheritance, Part 1* is certainly grand, it is so much more.

An astonishing three and a half hours - and *Part 2* opening later this month to run in rep - this is an immense undertaking for cast, crew and audience. From constructing the widest stage possible, using both wings, to relaying the lives, loves and losses of three generations of gay men, the show is painful enough to elicit sobs from the audience and joyous enough to generate belly laughs.

No, epic doesn't even begin to describe this one.

Inheritance, by Matthew López, is a raw look at the marginalization of gays, the loss of life due to AIDS and the buoyancy of men who survive because they have their "families of choice."

The production then introduces a character representing British author E.M. Foster, whose early 20th-century book *Howard's End* is said to have inspired López. Foster joins a crew of gay friends struggling to write their story, becoming their coach, prompting plot twists and guiding story development, injecting his old-fashioned, completely British humor along the way.

The story to be told is Toby's semi-autobiographical story about a young gay man. While he struggles to get the concept written and staged, he relies on his partner, Eric and his rent-controlled apartment. Toby is egotistical, while Eric is sweet if undermotivated. Their relationship is challenged by a chance meeting with a young wealthy man, Adam.

As Foster, played exquisitely by **Stephen Thorne**, moves the animated crew through the story, a third generation of gay men is introduced, bonding with Eric while Toby heads to Chicago to produce his play.

Through the tumult of the AIDS epidemic, the fight for gay marriage and what seems to be a somewhat lackluster aftermath, the emphasis is on what, *if anything*, people glean or inherit from human interactions. What can the older men teach the younger? How does it feel when a younger man realizes he is the older mentor? What does the sum of it all mean for them?

Directed by **Joe Wilson Jr.**, *Inheritance Part 1* is honest, provocative and memorable. He and the cast use humor and riveting monologues to impress the depth of these experiences on the audience in ways that leave them forever changed.

The cast meshes organically with simultaneous chatter and laughter feeling like invitations to their private party. Sex is handled in edgy ways, with body motions and props like long white sheets simulating stimulation, as Foster narrates with lines like, "Release the hounds!"

The friends represent all backgrounds and experiences. The older Walter, given a wonderfully awkward persona by **Mauro Hantman**, recalls his father calling him a "feathery, delicate boy." Toby, played to fiery perfection by **Taavon Gamble**, is quiet about his childhood, hinting at trauma. One married

couple is adopting. Another claims he will never marry.

The ensemble offers breath-taking moments and monologues with a passion that is unparalleled. **Chingwe Padraig Sullivan** makes his Trinity debut as Adam, infusing the character with sharp contrast that shifts with the company he keeps. **Jack Dwyer** embodies the uncertainty and insecurity of Eric beautifully.

Together, the men persevere, asking each other at one point how to preserve “gay markers” special to their community. It is at that point that the show, which stretches over three acts, could potentially be tightened. One segment feels slightly preachy and repetitive, perhaps better suited for post-show talk-back sessions. Some salient messages – the need, for example, to protect gays from vengeful fanatics – get overshadowed by the verbosity.

Even with this observation, *Inheritance Part 1* proves a treasure to educate some, comfort others and deepen the larger sense of community we desire. The show runs through November 5, with Part 2 running from September 22 to November 6. *For more information, go to www.trinityrep.org.