

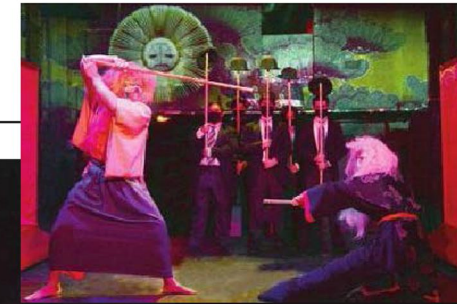
# A Bloody Tragedy

by chris carpenter

Thirty years ago—when AIDS was a deadly disease but still considered limited to gay men—medical companies in the US knowingly sold HIV-infected blood to Japan. More than 2,000 Japanese citizens died as a result.

Robert Allan Ackerman's world premiere play *Blood*, which will be presented by LA's The Garage, promises to expose the truth behind this shocking, little-known scandal. Ackerman is the Golden Globe- and Emmy-nominated director of numerous made-for-TV exposés including *Nothing Sacred* (1998), *Life With Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001) and *The Reagans* (2003). He recently spoke with *The Rage Monthly* about his new and possibly, most important project.

photography by ed krieger



**How and when did you first become aware of the Japanese “tainted blood scandal?”**

I first became aware of it as it was happening, in the early- to mid-1980s. I was living in Tokyo at the time and was approached by a film company to write a screenplay about it. They gave me all the research and I read it all and followed what I could in the press. I wrote a treatment, but was then advised not to do it because it could be dangerous for me...I could be targeted by someone involved. So, I put it away and moved on to other projects.

**What made you decide to dramatize it now for the stage?**

When the tsunami and subsequent meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant happened in 2011 and there were constant reports of misinformation coming out of Japan, I thought “Maybe, it’s time to take another look at this piece.” I took out the treatment and turned it into a theatre piece. *Blood* is a fictionalized account, including making the main reporter American, as was suggested by the film company. Also, I had retired from film and TV and returned to my roots in theatre.

**The press release describes *Blood* as a “political thriller with music,” which seems an unusual combination. How does the music figure in?**

It is predominantly rock music (composed by “The Virgins” bassist Nick Ackerman and “Jet” drummer/vocalist Chris Cester) and some music borrowed from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*. I envisioned *Blood* as a theatrical opus incorporating music, vaudeville and kabuki theatre, kind of everything I know about theatre. I also added humor because it could otherwise be a very dark piece. I envisioned the villains more as vaudevillian clowns, which I think is more interesting.

**Despite considerable strides in prevention and treatment, AIDS remains sadly relevant for the gay**

**community today. Is there any other specifically gay or LGBT content in *Blood*?**

There are no gay characters in the play. When the AIDS crisis began in Japan, it was hemophilia getting it through infected blood. I remember in the gay section of Tokyo, all the bars had signs out saying “No Americans allowed.” At the time, AIDS was seen as a gay American problem.

**You’ve previously helmed TV dramatizations of major real-life figures Judy Garland and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. How has your approach to the story told in *Blood* been similar to or different from those previous projects?**

This is kind of different. Dealing with Garland and the Reagans, we were very, very careful to be historically accurate at every moment we could be. With *Blood*, I had to condense the timeline and events. For example, the main trial in Japan (holding those accountable for selling infected blood) took eight years but we depict it as just lasting a few months in *Blood*. It’s necessary to do so from a dramatic standpoint or else the play would last forever.

**What do you hope audiences will take away from watching *Blood*?**

I’m hoping people begin to feel a sense of activism. It’s a story about taking action against greed, hypocrisy and corruption. For me, the enemy is pacifism, knowing something is wrong but doing nothing about it and avoiding responsibility. What really opened people’s eyes in Japan, was when a young man, a boy really, went public and said, “I have AIDS.” **Were you personally impacted by AIDS in the ‘80s and ‘90s?**

Oh yeah, very close friends and my companion of 20 years died. Many of the people I worked with in the theatre in New York died. I very much feel that *Blood* is a memorial to them. Whenever people today say, “AIDS is so passe,” I tell them “No, it isn’t.” It’s still happening.

***Blood* takes place at The Garage in the Complex (Ruby) Theatre, 6467 Santa Monica in L.A. Saturday, March 5 through Sunday, April 3. For tickets and more information, call 323.960.7745 or go to [plays411.com/blood](http://plays411.com/blood).**

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