

Modern Martyr – *How to Die: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* at A.D. Players

[D. L. Groover](#) April 14, 2025 7:18AM



Photo by Miranda Zaebst. David Kenner as Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Eighty years ago, April 9, 1945, Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp in Bavaria. Stripped naked, he was hanged then revived, then hanged again. It was a grisly way to die, evil and sadistic as only the Nazis could perfect. Bonhoeffer was not granted a trial but a kangaroo court verdict without charges, evidence, or rebuttal. It was cut and dried.

A thorn in the side of the regime for decades, the pastor was ripe for the Third Reich's vengeance. He accepted his fate with the grace that had always defined him. He was murdered three weeks before Hitler's suicide ended WW II in Europe.

In the A.D. Players' world premiere of Andy Pederson's *How to Die: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, the theologian's life is presented as a non-apologetic bio-play, in chronological order like a golden age Hollywood movie about Pasteur, Juarez, young Edison, or Madame Curie. **It is earnest in the extreme, extremely well acted, and set in Kirk Domer's handsome projection-filled set flanked with swastikas and**

golden columns topped with the German eagle, all surrounded by panels of Bonhoeffer's writings which continue onto the floor. It's sleek and practical, unlike Pederson's play, which is a bit anti-climactic. We know where this leads. The surprises are few.

We dutifully follow Bonhoeffer's journey (David Kenner, stalwart and solid) from theology student, that he declares at age 13 to the bemused astonishment of his parents, as best friend Eberhard Bethge (Jeff McMorrough), Bonhoeffer's future biographer, leads us through the years as narrator, always reminding us of the thread of life, its warp and weft, its fraying, its delicate nature.

Titles and dates are flashed on the screen to give us bearing, while Bonhoeffer's goodness and moral courage are put to the test. He is steadfast in his defiance of Hitler, preaching, writing, lecturing about the evils about to befall his beloved Germany. In the early '30s, he travels to New York City to study at the famed Union Theological Seminary and finds their convictions wanting. He can't see Jesus' teachings in evidence anywhere but at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church under the leadership of Frank Fisher (Werner Richmond, in a charismatic performance). Bonhoeffer can't abandon his people to the despots who rule Germany, he must fight. He's no saint, he declares, but he must resist whatever that means, whatever that takes.

He can not stand idly by like the church elders in Germany who bow to Hitler's edicts, such as the Aryan Paragraph that barred Jews – "non Aryans" – from social and political organizations. When the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1935, the Aryan Paragraph was cemented into German law. It was the beginning of the end. As Pederson quotes, the church must not simply "bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

Bonhoeffer adamantly opposed such blatant bigoted proclamations. He headed his own underground seminary in Finkelwald, Poland, in direct opposition to the Deutsche Christen, the Nazi approved national church. He was fast becoming radicalized, which led him ultimately to be selected to join the Abwehr, the intelligence service with its secret cabal to assassinate Hitler.

He knows people, especially influential members of the church of England. Perhaps he can persuade Bishop Bell (Trevor Cone) to intercede with Churchill to sanction their plot, to save Germany from evil, to understand that not all Germans are the enemy. Bonhoeffer wants Germany to succeed after the peace, but not win the war. This is futile, England will not condone their work nor give them assistance.

Assassination attempts are tried and fail. The Gestapo is on to them, and Bonhoeffer is arrested in 1943. The play catches fire when Gestapo leader Manfred Roeder (John Feltch) appears. He is urbane and very dangerous. Deliciously evil and using false humility to persecute Bonhoeffer, Feltch bathes in the man's ultimate vileness. He purrs, he insinuates, he threatens Bonhoeffer's family to get a reaction. Snake-like, he's the man you love to hate, like Erich von Stroheim or Otto Preminger in their vicious Nazi roles in American movies from the war years. Feltch ratchets up the tension in Act II. The play comes alive whenever he appears.

Friendly jailer Knobloch (Trevor Cone), overcome by Bonhoeffer's piety and selflessness in helping the inmates at Berlin's infamous Tegel prison, will help him escape. Bonhoeffer seriously considers his offer, then refuses. He must fight on and resist, even though he knows it will lead to his death. Cone plays this man with a steely gentleness that reads just right. We want Bonhoeffer to escape with the same passion as Knobloch's. Cone warms up the drama, and for a brief moment, we have hope. Other notable Houston actors admirably round out the supporting cast: Craig Griffin, Danny Hayes, Shondra Marie, Luisa Menzen, and Spencer Plachy.

If a bit stately and staid in its telling – at two and half hours, it is stately in the extreme – this world premiere, a bookend to A.D. Players' *The Beams Are Creaking* (2012) from playwright Douglas Anderson, is thoughtful and given life by director Kevin Dean. David Palmer's lighting design is top-notch and the projections and sound work by Michael Mullins (did I detect biplanes in the WW II segments?) are eye-catching and effective.

Giving life to a modern-day martyr can easily verge on hagiography. Pederson keeps the saint at arm's length and allows the man to emerge. Conflicted as he was over planning another man's death – no matter how evil – Bonhoeffer lives on stage as a man for all seasons.

How to Die: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer continues through May 4. at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays at A.D. Players at the George Theater, 5420 Westheimer. For more information, call 713-526-2721 or visit adplayers.org. \$25-\$75.



D.L. Groover has contributed to countless reputable publications including the *Houston Press* since 2003. His theater criticism has earned him a national award from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN) as well as three statewide Lone Star Press Awards for the same. He's co-author of the irreverent appreciation, *Skeletons from the Opera Closet* (St. Martin's Press), now in its fourth printing.