



THEATER REVIEW: "ANGELS IN AMERICA"

"Angels in America", the Pulitzer Prize and Tony award winning play by Tony Kushner, examines the possibilities for spiritual regeneration during the siege of AIDS along with the devolution of altruism and social commitment that characterized the Reagan era. The Jewish left, the City of Manhattan, the money grubbing yuppies of the 1980's, former drag queens, a domestic drug addict, closet gay men, the henchman of the McCarthy hearings, Ethel Rosenberg, repressed Mormon mothers, feckless lovers and loyal friends—all are the subject of Kushner's play.

Now touring in a national company, the two separate plays that make up *Angels in American*, part one, "Millennium Approaches" and part two, "Perestroika" tell the story of two men enduring the ravages of the AIDS virus during the mid 1980's. The first, Prior Walter, is an entirely sympathetic, sometimes foolish former drag queen; the second is the thoroughly evil Roy Cohn, a character based on the real-life lawyer who assisted and encouraged the persecution of politically suspect artists and politicians during the McCarthy hearings. Cohn also was primarily responsible for the conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of espionage. The stories

of these two men offer a point-counterpoint saga about the search for human meaning beyond selfishness, competition and narcissism, qualities that seemed to dominate the morally wizened 1980's. In the first play neither man seems likely to be redeemed. Prior is deserted by his lover, Louis, who cannot face the physical deterioration and anguish promised by the virus, and Cohn denies his gay sexual orientation, infuriated at the doctor who gives him the AIDS diagnosis. Cohn rages through his last days, still attempting to manipulate everyone around him to serve his egoistic ends. Louis meets Cohn's assistant, Joe Pitt, who is unhappily married to a Valium addict, Harper, and has closeted his gay sexual orientation from everyone, including himself. Both Louis and Joe betray their needy partners by beginning an affair with each other, while Harper and Prior writhe through their personal torments with only the solace of drug and fear-induced hallucinations. In one of these hallucinations they meet, and the playwright offers us a vision of human decency, encased in human frailty, as these two guileless characters connect in a surreal landscape. As the first play ends, Roy Cohn is visited by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, who tells him that his time is up; Prior is visited, in a stunning

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theatrical moment, by an Angel, who literally bursts from the ceiling to tell him that he's a Prophet and their work together is about to begin. This ending seems to offer Prior and the audience a spiritual destination beyond earth, out of reach of the terrible human struggles and suffering that both have witnessed thus far. The Angel seems poised to save Prior, to offer a meaning that his life apparently does not have, to rescue him from us, the disappointing and feckless human world.

The second play, "Perestroika" turns this idea of spirituality on its head as the Prior's Angel becomes his tormentor—appearing in the middle of the night, flailing him with largely unintelligible speeches set in stentorian cadences, full of pomposity and utterly deprived of wit. "SUBMIT, SUBMIT, TO THE WILL OF HEAVEN," she orders. Prior crawls frantically away from this fierce Angel and begs her to leave him alone. When she calls him a "Prophet" he cries out, "I'm not a prophet—I'm a sick, lonely man." The Angel is bereft, for God has left heaven, "bored with his angels, bewitched by humanity" in whom he had unleashed the "Sleeping Creation's potential for change." Humans (infected with "the virus of time") have proved more interesting to God than the angels, who represent stasis and entropy. Beguiled by time and its possibilities for change and indeterminacy, God has deserted the angels; no one knows where God is, including

Prior, who acknowledges that God "walked out on us" too.

Kushner offers indeterminacy as the most compelling aspect of human existence, underlining the role of chance and the unexpected in human relationships. Even the humans



Prior meets in heaven allay their boredom by playing cards, for the only pleasure in Heaven, where "everything is known" is the possibility of an unknown future that a card game offers. "Perestroika" shows us how its characters are interconnected in unexpected ways. Louis meeting Joe leads to Joe's repressed Mormon mother from Utah meeting, and ultimately succoring, Prior. Cohn's manipulations and deviousness secure him a stash of the experimental drug AZT; upon his anguished and unrepentant death, Prior's best friend and fellow former drag queen Belize, who is also Cohn's nurse, take the remainder of the drug for Prior. One of the most moving scenes in the play occurs when

the leftist Louis, who sees Cohn as the "polestar of human evil", is enlisted by Belize to help obtain the unused drug from Cohn's room after his death. Belize urges Louis to say Kaddish for him, "It isn't easy...it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet." As Louis reluctantly stumbles through the Hebrew prayer for the dead, Ethel Rosenberg appears to join him. Kushner avoids the scene's potential sentimental pitfall, (while leaving the message of atonement intact) by having her end the prayer with "You sonofabitch."

Prior rejects the still emptiness, the cessation of heaven and death and demands "more life", in spite of the angel's warning that "You have not seen what is to come." She cannot understand how he can refuse her offer of surcease. "What will the grim Unfolding of these Latter Days bring That you or any Being should wish to endure them? Death more plenteous than all Heaven has tears to mourn it...," she warns. Yet Prior has no qualms. "I want more life. I can't help myself I do. I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much much worse, but.... You see them living anyway." Prior reminds us of the profound courage of persons with AIDS when he tells the Angel "We live past hope. If I can find hope anyway, that's it, that's the best I can do." The angel hurls Prior out of heaven and back to his feverish sick bed where he wakes with the words

of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and greets his loyal companions.

Relationships reconfigure at the end of the play; everyone reconnects but Joe, whose inauthenticity and lack of courage leaves him the only atomistic character outside the quantum universe Kushner has created. As the play ends, it is five years later; we see Louis, Belize, Prior and Joe's formerly repressed mother, Hannah, (who has been transformed into an aware and empathetic New Yorker), all enjoying a beautiful day in Central Park. Prior, who has been given longer life with AZT, is blind in one eye and lame. He has refused to take the repentant and more mature Louis back as a lover, but their bond seems deeply forged nonetheless. Louis and Belize are arguing about Israel and the Palestinians. Prior, who has developed a sustaining friendship with Hannah, breaks the circle of the play to speak directly to the audience. In the eloquent and deeply moving peroration, Kushner offers a valedictory for those who have died and will die of AIDS. "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now," Prior waves to the audience. "You are fabulous creatures. each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins."

The Great Work is not the work of the Angels, as

"Millennium Approaches" implies, but of humans: of life, of change, pain, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, courage, loyalty, and above all, "living beyond hope." God is hiding in the tenacious human spirit, Kushner seems to be saying. We may not see him now, but his reappearance and our regeneration depend on human interconnection, not on a world outside of human existence. The Angel may have offered a false promise of spiritual salvation, but Prior is truly a prophet, for he sees the potential for change and spiritual meaning in the human spirit—we are the "fabulous" creatures, not the Angels of our feverish dreams.

Kushner does not waste time decrying failed or even missing Gods in "Angels", for his characters find God in the collective. The playwright models human relationships on quantum physics, where all things are connected and in continuous motion, where change is the rule and causality is nondeterministic and dynamic. Separation and fixity are illusions, the particle universe teaches us that all is change and movement. As Harper reflects during her flight to San Francisco to begin a new life, "Nothing's lost forever. In this world there's a kind of painful progress; Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead."

"Angels in America" reminds us that the most important spiritual realm is here on earth; the challenges of living an authentic life in the face of horror draw on and nourish our deepest spiritual strength. "Have

you no decency, sir?" the question asked of Joseph McCarthy by Joseph Welsh during the McCarthy hearings is the question Louis asks Joe at the end of their relationship; it is also the question Kushner is asking those embracing empty materialism and greed as their lodestar, as well as those politicians and policy makers who have turned away from the AIDS epidemic.

Finally Kushner asks the audience to reflect on our capacity for decency and spiritual growth. "Perestroika" means rebuilding; abandoned by God and ideology ("It's all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now," Louis says at the end of the play), life is wholly inductive. To live it we must make a great leap of faith. The Hebrew word for blessing, Kushner writes in a preface to the play, is translated as "more life." "Angels" reminds us that embracing life with courage and faith in each other is our greatest spiritual challenge. □

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