

A nation of angels:
the development of
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A play of epic proportions, Tony Kushner's magnum opus *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes* presents a portrait of America that is at first sight devastating, yet ultimately optimistic and profound in its analysis of humanity's development amidst chaos. The play has two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, and each displays a very different approach to the reality of America in 1985; the former is a world of destruction whereas the latter is a nation of renewal. Throughout both parts, the four main characters struggle to overcome the irony within themselves and each other, the same irony that poses a threat to their spiritual survival. The first section ends with the characters at the height of these inner conflicts, with seemingly little hope for salvation. In *Perestroika*, the main four overcome these ironies with direct (sometimes unconscious) help from others, leading to an ending filled with optimism not only for the characters, but for the audience and the world as well. Kushner's epic *Angels in America* utilizes two distinctly different parts that chronicle the four main characters' struggles to forgive the ironies not only within themselves but with each other, and these developments lead up to two very different conclusions that eventually build thematic bridges between the stage and the audience, all in presentation of the "fantasia" Kushner envisions for America's future.

The action of Part I reveals the ironies within the characters of Prior and Harper, whose conflicts come from how they view and treat themselves. We can assume that Prior, as a gay man, had the experience of needing a long time, perhaps years, to come to terms with his sexual identity. His diagnosis launches him backwards into a phase of self-loathing, exemplified after he looks at himself in the mirror during a dream and says, "I don't think there's

any uninfected part of me...I feel dirty”(I, 34). AIDS, considered the fatally distinguishing mark of a gay man at the time, is setting an uncloseted character back into the position of feeling uncomfortable with his identity. Harper, challenged by the reality of her unhappy marriage, goes against her religion by fostering an addiction to the only thing that really makes her life bearable: Valium. Antarctica, her place of drug-induced refuge, is simply a reflection of the frigid nature of her reality. She, like Prior, is aware of how she comes off to her partner, comparing herself to a “mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife” (I, 37). It is the necessity of both characters to overcome these ironies and perceptions of themselves that characterize each person’s journey through the play, with their conflicts rising (but not resolving) just enough to lead to the explosive finale to Part I.

Millennium Approaches is also framed by the introductions of two relationships that are ultimately contaminated by one member of each. The most obvious of these betrayals is Louis’ abandonment of Prior after the latter has been diagnosed with AIDS. Louis’ rationale is that he, “has to” and that he can’t “incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go” (I, 25). The obvious irony is that the audience, Prior, and Louis himself know that there is no justification for his actions, foreshadowing the immense guilt that will plague his journey. Meanwhile, Joe’s overt betrayal of his relationship with his wife comes from his irrepressible homosexuality. His journey will be trying to reconcile his two true selves: his devotion to religion and desire to be “Correct...in the eyes of God” (I, 40) and his homosexual desires, though both forces oppose each other. Each man is reflected by how he has treated his relationship, with

Louis entirely plagued with guilt and Joe finally starting to embrace his sexuality, both in the name of abandonment.

When *Millennium Approaches* ends, none of the four characters have made any real progress towards positive solutions for each of their conflicts. Prior is still a victim to his disease and is still heartbroken by his abandonment. Harper's storyline concludes with her in Antarctica, showing that she is still a prisoner to her own delusions. Louis is still plagued by his cowardice and gives into the temptation of an ultimately doomed relationship. Joe is the only character who has seemingly made progress, as he has given into the desires that he has felt all of his life, which would usually signal the development of his character. However, no real progress has actually been made, as he still chides himself for his actions, saying to Louis, "I'm a pretty terrible person, Louis" and "I don't think I deserve to be loved" (I, 117). The irony of the ending is that all four of these characters, as Americans, should be thriving: it is the 1980s, the "Me Decade", where all Americans should be succeeding. Instead, everything in the world that Kushner presents is falling apart, and America is destroying itself. Even though Part I ends with the formation of a new couple, it is palpable that there is something truly wrong with their union, as they are two extremely different people coming together despite ultimately destructive differences. There is no hope in the end of *Millennium Approaches* until the arrival of the character that will (though inadvertently) spark the "perestroika" of America: the Angel.

The entrance of the Angel is highly significant to the conclusion, as well as the overall meaning, of *Angels in America*. Prior can sense that something is coming, as "the bedside lamp flickers" and there's "creaking and groaning"
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from the bedroom ceiling” (I, 118). Just when the audience (and Prior) thinks it’s over, there is, “ A sound, like a plummeting meteor...we hear a terrifying CRASH as something immense strikes the earth...the whole building shudders and a part of the bedroom ceiling, lots of plaster and lathe and wiring, crashes to the floor...[then] the Angel descends into the room and floats above the bed”(I, 118). The entrance of the Angel is chaotic and destructive, a metaphoric climax of the devastation of Millennium Approaches. However, the pandemonium of the ending ultimately alienates the audience even further from the play. The fate of the characters is ambiguous, and until the audience members see Perestroika, they won’t know what the “ Great Work” the Angel speaks of is. The audience can only hope for a more positive second part of the play, yet this kind of unknowing hope is rather alienating in nature, as the future is uncertain. The strength of the conclusion of the first part is wholly diminished by the action and conclusion of the next part, Perestroika.

Leading up to the conclusion of the entire play is a new series of relationships that cause the four main characters be directly influenced by the four supporting characters: the Angel, Hannah, Roy, and Belize. Each supporting character’s interaction with one of the leads will instigate major changes in character for the sake of progress and, ultimately, for the sake of rebuilding America entirely. It is important to note the structural focus of Millennium Approaches; it is the disintegrating of two couples and the building of another (though unstable) union, all centering on those four characters’ relationships with each other. Perestroika does not follow this same format because Millennium Approaches has taught us that there is no

hope to rebuild an otherwise failing society with that type of aching, isolating character-based structure. Therefore, it is the relationships the four main characters have with others that force them to make revelations about themselves and each other, ultimately leading up to Kushner's progressive conclusion to *Angels in America*.

Prior's relationship with the Angel and Harper's relationship with Hannah help each of them make important realizations about themselves and spark a need for both of them to make changes in their lives and overcome the irony they live with. The new irony that the victimized Prior lives with is being condemned to death by his disease while also being "the chosen one" as a prophet for the Angels. His orgasmic encounter with the Angel gives him something he hasn't felt since he got sick, saying he feels full of "Joy or something. Hope" (II, 24). The irony of the encounter is that while it sparks Prior's newfound drive to fight for his life, he knows he cannot be the one to speak for the Angels' naïve and impossible purpose because it goes against his newfound desire to live as a fighter, not as a victim. Prior realizes that all of humanity, and especially he, must fight in order to live because that is the very nature of the human need for progress. And as he explains in heaven, "We can't just stop. We're not rocks – progress, migration, motion is... modernity" (II, 132). Prior's relationship with the Angel gave him the opportunity to live again as well as to learn, not from the Angel, but from his own self. Meanwhile, Joe's mother Hannah has been hell-bent on helping her daughter-in-law through her abandonment, but similarly the assistance to the character is indirect. Hannah's taking Harper to the Mormon Visitor's Center allows Harper to re-examine what movement and progression means,

as seen in her conversation with the diorama Mormon Mother (who herself is a symbol for Hannah). When Harper complains that she can't move because her "heart's an anchor", the Mormon Mother says, "Leave it, then. Can't carry no extra weight"(II, 71). Hannah exemplified this change by dropping everything and moving to New York, and even though she herself couldn't directly convey her message to Harper, Harper's story eventually concludes with her embracing progress and moving to San Francisco. These two interactions that Prior and Harper have help them realize the strength they have to fight back against their realities and desire for a better life because, as Kushner will argue, that is the new, progressive America.

Instead of analyzing progress, Joe's and Louis' relationships with the supporting characters revolve around the theme of forgiveness, presenting situations of the lack of it and the giving of it. Joe's relationship with Roy is an example of what happens when forgiveness is absent or revoked. When Joe comes out of the closet to Roy and reveals he is living with another man, Roy says, "I want you home. With your wife. Whatever else you got going cut it dead...Listen to me. Do what I say. Or you will regret it. And don't ever talk to me about it again"(II, 87). The encounter ultimately starts Joe's return into the closet, himself rationalizing that he simply cannot be a homosexual in the principal-based nation he and Roy desire to live in. Because his mentor cannot forgive him, Joe cannot forgive himself, and that isolating mindset prevents him from being a part of the "gay fantasia" of progress Kushner envisions for the future. Louis is taught by Belize, who played a confidant of sorts to Louis throughout the play and is perhaps the most principled of all the characters, that forgiveness is how the world will rebuild from chaos and

destruction. As Belize says to Louis over the corpse of Roy (who himself was a proponent of destruction), “[Forgiveness] isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least.”(II, 124). Belize’s wisdom ultimately sums up Kushner’s parallel argument: progress can only be made when forgiveness has been made. Louis and Belize must forgive Roy in order to move on and rebuild from the world of hatred that Roy advocated, and Joe must forgive himself for abandoning Prior in order to progress as a human being. Louis is able to overcome his irony, while Joe is heartbreakingly smothered by it. Kushner has thus presented the audience with the two most important elements to the rebuilding the collapsing world: progress and forgiveness in the name of inner and national development.

The epilogue to *Angels in America*, and the conclusion to *Perestroika*, are both built up by the characters’ journeys to overcome the world of irony within themselves and each other. Each main character, with the exception of Joe, has accepted the natural order to the world, the “painful progress” Harper speaks of. The conclusion of *Millennium Approaches* was an embodiment of chaos, whereas the conclusion of *Perestroika* presents the embodiment of “perestroika”, or “rebuilding”, itself. Kushner gives the audience two of the main characters and two of the supporting characters: Prior, Louis, Hannah, and Belize. Harper can’t be in the finale because it would go against her rebuilding her life and embracing of progress, and Joe cannot be there because he can’t forgive himself and thus does not have a place in the new society. Roy can’t be there because of what he stood for when he was alive (as well as the fact that he is dead), and the character of

the Angel cannot physically be there because she represents the motionlessness that can only stifle the new America that the four characters represent.

Once again, the audience is left with ambiguity regarding the fates of the characters. For example, no mention is made of how much longer Prior will live. But while the end of Part I alienated the audience, the end of Part II completely bridges the gap between the stage and the seats through a dramatic shattering of the fourth wall. All four characters directly address the audience from nearly the beginning of the scene, creating a direct and optimistic ending to a production that advocates individual and communal progressivism. By having the fourth wall broken, Kushner strives to universalize the experiences of the characters and allow those lessons the characters learn to become those of the audience as well. With the action now applicable to humanity itself, Kushner has proven the nature of progression and forgiveness, and that it is necessary for everybody in order to rebuild society. The audience leaves the theatre with the same blessing the Angel gave to Prior: “ The Great Work Begins”. The blessing now comes from the lips of Prior, an ordinary man and not an otherworldly figure. The real angel, Kushner proves, is the everyday individual. The everyday angel is the person who embodies forgiveness and progress for the sake of creating a better society. To universalize his message, Prior says to the audience, “ You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins” (II, 148), leveling the power of his words in order to strike them into the hearts of everyone present. Prior has asked the audience to become the embodiment of a progressive and forgiving future,

as it will create a better society, a better America, and a better self for the individual.

The seven-hour long saga of *Angels in America* is a distinctly American yet radical narrative for a number of reasons. The primary reason, in my opinion, is that it presents Americans with other Americans, taking the sole focus from the development of the self and presenting those who struggle with the exact same human fears and ironies that the other individual faces as well. Kushner argues that it is the preoccupation and the feeding of the concerns of the self that stifle the growth of a progressive and positive nation. This preoccupation is what dragged people apart at a time when it was so desperate for people to come together; the time of the Cold War and the AIDS crisis. *Millennium Approaches* addresses the preoccupation, and *Perestroika* addresses the solution. The characters, like the citizens of America, have to overcome the world of incredible irony that they live in, and if they do, they can create a utopian “fantasia” of America’s new potential for growth. *Angels in America* is framed with two halves that each represent the past and the future, filling the action with characters the audience can identify with and presenting a way to achieve the rebuilt society that is presented in *Perestroika*. Thus, Tony Kushner leaves his newly educated audience with the hope that they can rebuild themselves, learn to be each other’s *Angels in America*, and ultimately reform America into a strong, progressive nation.