

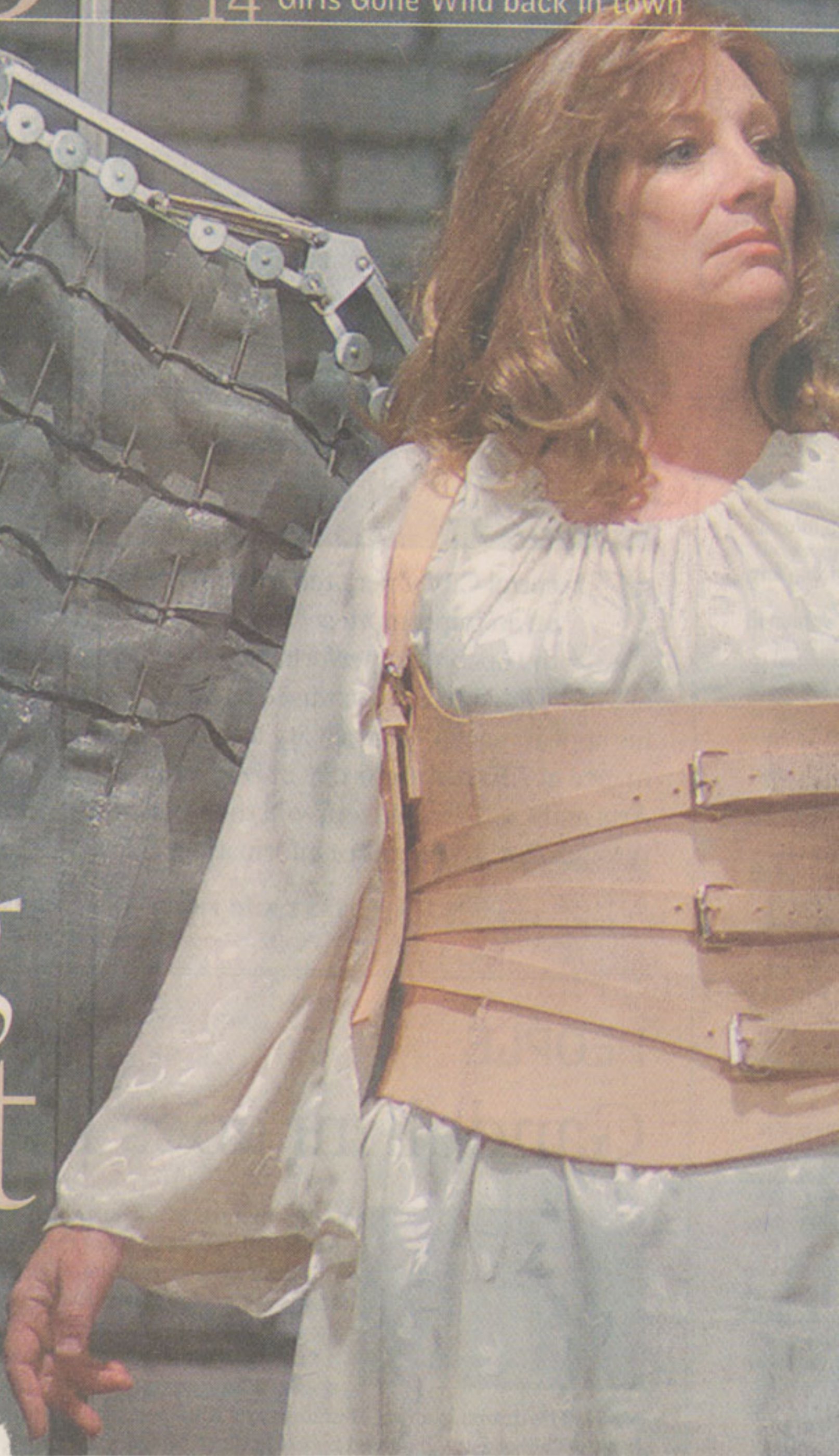
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Taking flight



By John Moore Denver Post Theater Critic

Epic "Angels" spreads wings in Fort Collins |

There are angels in America. Wendy Ishii believes in at least 240 in Fort Collins alone.

That's how many people have had a hand in helping her astral dream take wing. Tonight she christens the new \$1.5 million home for her 12-year-old Bas Bleu Theatre Company with an unprecedented collaborative presentation of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning epic "Angels in America."

The groundbreaking did not end with the conversion of the historic Giddings Building into a swank, 16,000-square-foot playhouse just north of downtown. It continues onstage tonight when Bas Bleu becomes only the second company in the state ever to tackle Kushner's six-hour, two-part literary landmark — the one that last month earned HBO 11 Emmy Awards.

Just as remarkable is that the endeavor is being undertaken in a partnership with crosstown rival OpenStage & Co. and the Colorado State University theater program. There has been no comparable cooperative effort in the state.

And OpenStage has contributed far more than sets and sweat. "Angels," which opens with Part I tonight (Part II joins in repertory beginning Oct. 22), stars the founders of both companies — Bas Bleu's Ishii as The Angel, and OpenStage's Denise and Bruce Freestone as Hannah Pitt and Roy Cohn. Joining them is an all-star cast, including Todd Coulter of the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Leonard Barrett Jr. (PHAMALy's "Guys and Dolls") and the Bug's Darren R. Schroader.

"This is historic in every way," said Denise Freestone. "Just opening a new theater is a phenomenal feat. So is mounting the equivalent of three full-length shows at once. So is a new collaboration between three companies for the first time. So is performing these particular roles. So is directing this material. And of the eight actors, four are traveling every day from Boulder or Denver. All of these things are extremely huge and demanding.

"But to me, you know it's the right thing to do when all those things are right there, but you just

> See "ANGELS" on 4FF

< "Angels" from IFF

have to do it anyway."

There were several times when Ishii asked, "Am I really insane to do this?"

"And every time we said, 'Yes' and just continued," Freestone said.

So too is simultaneously trying to mount your own 32nd season, as OpenStage is doing with "The Winter's Tale," opening at the Lincoln Center on Oct. 23, just one night after "Angels: Part II" bows.

"This material is the reason we're here," Freestone said. "When Bruce first read it, the next thing out of his mouth was, 'This is a play that can change the world.' That's how you can get all of these people to step off this cliff together."

"Angels in America" revolves around personal and political themes during the AIDS epidemic, and though its eight actors portray more than 40 characters, at its heart it is an intimate character study that manages to convey a massive snapshot of America in 1985 — socially, culturally and politically. It is simply one of the most monumental theatrical undertakings in history.

"This is probably the last major contribution of the 20th century to the dramatic literature canon," said CSU program chair Laura Jones, who directs "Part I: Millennium Approaches" while Denver's Terry Dodd tackles "Part II: Perestroika." "If you look at any new major



Brian Brainerd | The Denver Post

"Angels in America" is being staged in Bas Bleu's new \$1.5 million space in Fort Collins. The angel is Wendy Ishii.

literary anthology, there it is, starting with the Greeks and ending with 'Angels.' To me, it's like being able to do 'Hamlet' when it was first written. To do a play of that significance while the text's themes are still topical is a rare opportunity indeed."

Ishii said "Angels" would have gone on had OpenStage passed, "but doing it as a collaboration makes it much richer."

"I have called Bas Bleu my sandbox for 12 years now," said Ishii, a New York actress who moved to Fort Collins in 1985 after marrying a CSU physiolo-

gy professor. "Now that we are charging across the railroad tracks, I really wanted to invite everybody to come over and play in this new sandbox with us and help celebrate all of the arts in Fort Collins together."

This collaboration might not

be so significant if Ishii and Freestone were best friends — but they are not. "Oh, sure, we have a history, and it ain't all roses," Freestone said. "I don't think there was ever a time when the OpenStage organization would not have consid-

ered a collaboration like this, but I know there were times when I would consider not collaborating with Wendy."

But the companies have shared not only personnel but resources for a decade. And working together on "Angels,"

Freestone said, "has created a lot of affection between us."

"The bottom line is that we are both nonprofit entities, and although we have different mis-

> See "ANGELS" on 6FF

"Angels in America"

TWO-PART THEATRICAL

MILESTONE | Presented by Bas Bleu Theatre Company in collaboration with OpenStage & Co. and Colorado State University | Written by Tony Kushner | Directed by Laura Jones and Terry Dodd | Starring Wendy Ishii, Denise Freestone, Bruce Freestone, Todd Coulter, Kurt Brighton, Darren R. Schroader, Laura Norman and Leonard Barrett Jr. | 401 Pine St., Fort Collins | **THROUGH NOV. 20** | "Part I: Millennium Approaches" plays 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays until Oct. 22, after which it runs in repertory with "Part II: Perestroika" (dates then vary; both parts performed on the same date Oct. 30, Nov. 6 and Nov. 20) | **\$10-\$17** | 970-498-8949

The plot line

After AIDS-infected Prior is abandoned by his tormented lover, Louis, he is visited by angels and ancestors. Roy Cohn, based on the real lawyer who helped send Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair in 1953 for espionage, is a closeted homosexual who refuses to accept his own AIDS diagnosis because sickness, he believes, is for the powerless. Cohn's conservative protégé is Joe, a young, married Mormon who comes to embrace his homosexuality through Louis, leaving behind pill-popping wife Harper and his confused mother, Hannah.

◀ "Angels" from 4FF

sions, both of us exist to the benefit of the public. When you speak about the arts, you are speaking about the benefit of the spirit of humanity."

Where OpenStage has been most helpful is in the area of

technical expertise. While OpenStage's Lincoln Center home is expansive, Bas Bleu has been performing in a 49-seat salon space with a stage extending 18 feet from end to end. The new theater's

Bas Bleu timeline

1910 | The Western Steel Headgate Co. building opens at 401 Pine St., home of several machine shops. Later known as the Giddings Building.

1992 | Bas Bleu debuts at the Lincoln Center's mini-theater.

1994 | Bas Bleu moves into a 49-seat salon space at 216 Pine St.

Through August 2004, it hosted 450 events involving 2,100 artists performing for 30,000 patrons.

MAY 2002 | Bas Bleu board member Jon Prouty helps the Giddings Machine Co. move to Windsor, in effect by trading spaces. Prouty buys the old site for its eventual conversion into Bas Bleu's new theater.

AUGUST 2003 | Bas Bleu forms a limited-liability corporation with former Beirut hostage Thomas Sutherland, who underwrites the \$1.5 million purchase and renovation costs through a loan from Flatirons Bank of Boulder. In a unique financing concept, Bas Bleu is allowed to rent the space from the LLC while it completes a \$3 million fundraising effort that includes purchasing the space for itself and an ongoing second phase of renovations.

JULY 2004 | Dohn Construction begins a 100-day first-phase renovation.

TONIGHT | Bas Bleu opens "Angels in America" in its new, 99-seat interim space.

2007 | Projected completion of the second phase of renovations that will expand capacity to 149.

By the numbers

\$162,000 | Bas Bleu's total operating budget for 2003-04 season

\$220,000 | Bas Bleu's total operating budget for 2004-05 season

\$15,900 | Production budget for both parts of "Angels in America"

playing area is 50 feet wide.

"Bas Bleu had not had to accomplish a set of this size before, or execute intense, technical demands that go along with shifting scenes and multiple sets before," Freestone said. "That was one of the things we could bring to the table."

Jones said her CSU students are "unbelievably excited" about "Angels," though most of

the community remains unfamiliar with the material.

"If people don't know yet what it means for us to bring this production to the community," she said, "I think we are going to have a lot of converts before we're done."

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