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STAGE

By John Moore Denver Post Theater Critic

Humble "Angels" needs to spread its wings | The overachieving little Bas Bleu Theatre took its first

few steps last Friday on what promises to be a long, noble and epic journey. Two, actually.

One was christening a funky new home in Fort Collins that's inviting and spacious. The other was courageously embarking on "Angels in America," Tony Kushner's massive, two-part deconstruction of love, loss and sexual politics in the Reagan era. It is only the greatest new dramatic challenge of the past 50 years.

But those first few steps were tentative and unsure. On opening night, the company seemed immersed in reverence for Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning words, when his fiery text demands instead that they revel in them, brazenly and unabashedly. A soldier does not charge into battle with his sword half-drawn any more than a heart leaps into new love half-closed. This is no time for a slow descent down a gentle slope. This is a time to link arms and take a flying

leap off a cliff together.

"Part I: Millennium Approaches" establishes the plot and characters so that "Part 2: Perestroika" (opening in repertory Oct. 22) can go off on a wild, philosophical fantasia. But Part 1 does not yet have the confidence it needs for its impact to be as resonating (or as funny) as it should be.

Directors Laura Jones (Part 1) and Terry Dodd (Part 2) have cast eight great actors in eight great roles. But not every great actor is right for every great role, and "Angels" leaves no room for misalliance. It's a significant problem here.

Most effective at seizing her moment is Laura Norman as Harper, the sex-starved, pill-popping Mormon wife whose husband Joe (Darren R. Schroeder) is coming to terms with his latent homosexuality. Morose while still utterly charming, Harper is the most realized character. She struggles to face real-life demons when it's so much easier for her to embark on



Bas Bleu Theatre Company

Todd Coulter makes for a fine Prior, but several of the play's core relationships lack believability.

delicious flights of fantasy, such as a mental sojourn to Antarctica, home of the silent Eskimo of her dreams.

The excellent Todd Coulter is the emotional center as Prior, a delusional AIDS patient abandoned by a sniveling boyfriend incapable of witnessing his slow demise. But Prior's storyline is sandbagged by the incredulity of his four-year relationship with Louis

(Kurt Brighton) as presented here. It is all too recognizable how lovers fail one another in crises, but the foundation of the relationship being abandoned is less obvious. Coulter could pass for 16, but with Brighton's shaved head and his ill-advised grandpa glasses, he plays 25 years Prior's senior. That only makes his elderly cowardice all the more unforgiving.

And as insubstantial as this will sound, it is true: The audience must be able to see through Louis' weakness and recognize the qualities — be they physical beauty, intellect, lust for life, whatever — that will embolden the closeted Joe to give up his religion, wife and family and give himself completely to this man, of all people. Whatever it is in Louis that so appeals to Prior and Joe just doesn't play here.

Schroeder is best in scenes with Harper, but he needs a heightened awareness of the conflict between his character's burgeoning, rule-busting sexual awakening and his moral superiority toward Roy Cohn (Bruce K. Freestone), the evil attorney tempting Joe to become his mole in the justice department. Cohn, too, is a critical character whose emotional truth has not yet been realized here.

< "Angels" from 4FF

Part 1 gains its emotional footing in its fourth hour, in a heartbreaking scene showing the two couples disintegrating simultaneously. And two great strengths are late arrivals: Leonard Barrett Jr. as the nurse Belize and Denise Freestone as Joe's mom, Hannah Pitt.

But the crucial scene of Part 1 is misdirected. Louis and Belize meet for coffee, with Louis blathering on with hilarious contradiction on democracy, liberalism and race. "The U.S.," he says, "has no monolithic, dominant culture," he claims, which causes the black, gay Belize to caustically observe: "the monolith of straight white men is not unimpressive."

This is the scene that sets up the politics and philosophies of Part 2, and as with any portent, this warning must be delivered with sobriety and weight if not downright anger. Instead Barrett is directed to play this as comic bantering, and so the moment is lost.

Still, there is enough good here to believe that Bas Bleu's first, hesitant steps will yet grow into a raging gallop. Its actors, like the characters they portray, appear poised on threshold of revelation.

Theater critic John Moore can be reached at 303-820-1056 or jmoore@denverpost.com.

"Angels in America"

'PART I: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES' | Presented by Bas Bleu Theatre Company, in collaboration with OpenStage & Co. and Colorado State University | Written by Tony Kushner | Directed by Laura Jones | Starring Todd Coulter, Darren R. Schroeder, Laura Norman, Bruce Freestone and Kurt Brighton | 401 Pine St., Fort Collins | **THROUGH NOV. 20** | 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays ("Part Two: Perestroika" joins in repertory Oct. 22, after which showtimes vary | 3 hours, 30 minutes, with two intermissions | **\$10-\$17** | 970-498-8949

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