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Article Published: Thursday, October 28, 2004  
 theater review

## "Angels" Part 2: Perestroika

By [John Moore](#)  
 Denver Post Theater Critic



William A. Cotton / Bas Bleu Theatre Company

AIDS-infected Prior (Todd Coulter) isn't the only one who has been abandoned by God in "Angels in America." So, too, has his angel of history, played by the remarkable Wendy Ishii.

course, given the catastrophic suffering one man has repeatedly inflicted upon another, the distinction may only be a matter of semantics.

As "Part 2: Perestroika" opens in breathtaking fashion at the Bas Bleu Theatre, the angel appears before the plagued prophet Prior and announces, "The great work begins!" Her mechanized wings are spread wide, but no longer white. They are charcoal, perhaps, sooted by a century of industrial waste.

Kushner's inspiration came from a German cultural critic's take on painter Paul Klee's 1920 "Angelus Novus," which was his reaction to the devastation of World War I. In it, an angel's eyes are staring, his mouth open, his wings spread.

**Fort Collins** - In Tony Kushner's revolutionary opus "Angels in America," an AIDS patient sees his first lesion as a calling card from the angel of death. But the work's defining symbol is really the angel of history. Of

"This is how one pictures the angel of

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wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call 'progress.'"

In deeply personal ways, Kushner's eight riveting characters wage their own small struggles against their inability to "make whole what has been smashed," while pondering ways of re-making a future free from past mistakes, which in 1986 included the insidiousness of AIDS, government corruption and the greed of drug manufacturers.

While those overarching themes may intimidate some theatergoers, Bas Bleu's seven-hour, two-part presentation, in collaboration with OpenStage and Colorado State University, is an intimate, character-driven effort that insinuates itself into your heart and mind. It is never for one second unworthy of the investment it asks. Your return is the breathtaking images, haunting revelations and heartbreaking performances that trouble the mind for days.

Part 2, directed by Terry Dodd, joins Laura Jones' first part in harmonizing repertory. "Perestroika" feels like a promise fulfilled, with Dodd executing a payoff rooted in Jones' delicate groundwork. Though the combined effort is undeniably blemished, it is as easy to love as any human being we vest in deeply. The result is a monumental achievement.

"Perestroika" is defined as tearing something down and putting it back together better. In the 1980s, that was Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet reforms. In

history," Walter Benjamin wrote. "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon

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Kushner's view, Ronald Reagan's America was in similar need of reconstruction. His great questions: Can we change? Will the past release us? Or are we simply doomed?

Part 2 continues the story of Prior, an AIDS patient abandoned by his lover Louis (Kurt Brighton), a liberal who flees death by running into the arms of a gay, Republican, married Mormon (Darren R. Schroeder). Joe's Valium-popping wife Harper (Laura Norman) finds unexpected comfort from his hard-line mother Hannah Pitt (Denise B. Freestone). And Prior's trusted nurse Belize (the letter-perfect Leonard Barrett Jr.) is made to tend the dying Roy Cohn (Bruce Freestone), the embodiment of the era's hypocrisy.

"Angels" is a fantasia. Scenes bleed into one another; characters are haunted by delusions that intersect and interact, while the story stays rooted in an aching reality. Most affecting is Cohn's interplay with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, whom he sent to the electric chair years before. Most glorious is Prior's ascent to a council of angels, where he refuses their offer of death's release.

In Kushner's world view, God split after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, abandoning his creation on earth and his angels in heaven. Prior's advice: If he ever returns, "you should sue the bastard for walking out on all of us."

Would there be enough ink to fully detail the triumph of these performances, notably Coulter's defiant everyman, Barrett's humanist outcast, Norman's damaged wife ("When your heart breaks, you should die"), Schroeder's courageous leap and Ishii's maternal angel. But special notice is due Denise Freestone, who covers comedy to heartbreak as Rosenberg and Mother Pitt. Freestone eschews sentiment like the plague, which makes Mother's rocklike support for Harper and her son's lover's ex-lover (whew!) the play's bedrock.

"Angels in America" does not leave you heartbroken. And after seven hours, it does not leave you exhausted. It leaves you appreciative of the power of theater and energized that as a people, we can do better. This is a storm we have come through - the storm of progress.

Theater critic John Moore can be reached at 303-820-1056 or [jmoore@denverpost.com](mailto:jmoore@denverpost.com).

**"Angels in America" \*\*\* 1/2**

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