

The production actually consists of two separate plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. Each play is orchestrated by a different director but employs the same cast and crew. Huge in scope, the play is set in New York City during the mid-1980s when the AIDS epidemic was rapidly growing and Reagan-style conservatism threatened to push any dissenters into the periphery forever. The action centers around two couples with some interesting problems.

Louis is a neurotic word processor whose lover of four years, Prior, has contracted AIDS. Meanwhile Joe, a Mormon Republican lawyer, has some complicated issues to work out with his wife, Harper, who suffers emotional problems and a Valium addiction. Add into the mix real-life conservative icon Roy Cohn and a messenger angel and we have a winner. Literally. Kushner now has a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award under his belt and the cable miniseries won at least one Emmy. Bas Bleu's current production of the two plays is further proof of the company's dedication to important, thought-provoking literature.

Angels in America is the result of a rare collaboration of different theaters within one community. Bas Bleu teamed up with OpenStage Theatre and the Colorado State University Theatre Program in order to pool resources and talent. *Millennium Approaches* is directed by Laura Jones, Director of Theater for Colorado State University, and *Perestroika* by Denver guest artist Terry Dodd. The two have worked together on projects in the past, but never in this fashion. While collaboration was minimal, the two periodically visited each other's rehearsals and discussed their perceptions of the play.

"We both entered the project with great respect for Kushner's text and agreed not to stray from it significantly," Jones explains. "In *Millennium Approaches* I really strove to set up the story so that Terry could smoothly bring it to conclusion."

Both directors wholeheartedly agreed on the casting of the play which brought actors from different regions and from other local theater companies to Bas Bleu. OpenStage founders Denise Burson Freestone and Bruce K. Freestone each have roles. Denise plays Joe's emotionally withdrawn Mormon mother, Hannah, while Bruce plays Roy Cohn. Both parts call for fiery emotion and everything else that comes from living with dark secrets. Associate member of OpenStage, Kurt Brighton, plays self-absorbed Louis who uses every intellectual excuse in the book for his squeamishness about disease. When Prior experiences some of the nastier symptoms of AIDS, Louis literally runs from the room screaming, "I can't!" Brighton made an impressive debut with Bas Bleu last season in

its production of *Old Times* and continues to prove his mettle with his smart, sensitive and sometimes weaselly portrayal of Louis. Bas Bleu's own Wendy Ishii, who has a knack for being fabulous, plays the Angel sent from above with a message for an emerging prophet. The Angel is varying stern, loving and comical as she reveals herself to Prior and gradually makes her point.

The rest of the cast gamely commute from Denver to play their roles in *Angels* which

plays with gender-bending and irony when he has Norman, who plays the drug-addicted Mormon housewife, double as Martin, an ultraconservative underling of Ed Meese who smugly spouts off about the impending death of liberalism. Similarly, Ishii takes off the wings to play a disturbing and hilarious insane homeless woman in the Bronx who doesn't know how to get to Brooklyn but can recite detailed directions to the Mormon Visitor's Center on cue.

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Wendy Ishii portrays the Angel and is varying stern, loving and comical as she reveals herself to Prior (Todd Coulter).

illustrates Kushner's ability to bring people together. Todd Coulter plays Louis' boyfriend, Prior, who comes from a long European family line. Prior is a smart, funny young man who becomes ravaged by disease and visited by an angel, which always gets a rise out of him. Coulter's Prior goes through myriad emotions but always manages to pull darkly funny jokes out of his situation. Darren R. Schroeder (Joe) was raised in Utah and is almost too believable

Angels is an expansive play that tackles several heavy issues. As Dodd says, Kushner is "a political animal who wants to shake his audience into action." Through his characters, Kushner brings up and explores things that polite company avoids discussing such as religion, politics and sexuality.

Kushner clearly sees religion as a defining feature of America. It is doubtful that he ascribes to any set belief system and may agree

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as the poster boy for Mormon morality. On the surface Joe is a strapping young Republican crusader but he seems to know all too well why his wife has turned out to be an agoraphobic pill-popper. As Harper, Laura Norman is charismatic and brings a lively sense of fun to her role even as we watch Harper descend fully into her delusions. Leonard Barrett, Jr. plays Belize (a drag stage name that struck) who links the other characters and provides them with wisdom, brutal honesty and unconditional goodwill. Belize comes off as more of an angel than the Angel as he helps others through their times of need. Never ceasing to be sassy and contentious, he's there to ease pain, even that of his adversaries. Barrett sings and testifies through his line-stealing scenes left and right.

A slew of minor characters are also played by the cast. This was not a directorial decision but was deliberately written into the text. Kushner

with Prior who states that if there is a God, then he should be sued for damages. Himself a Jew, Kushner lays out his issues with Judaism in the character of Louis who is, at best, uncomfortable with his Jewishness. Not that he is any more comfortable with any other religion. When he ponders Mormonism he can only muster the idea that "any religion that's not at least two thousand years old is a cult."

Director Laura Jones contends that Kushner used Mormon characters.

"Mormonism provides the strongest contrast to Judaism," she says. "It is a much younger and very conservative religion."

All of the non-secular characters are drawn in broad strokes. Mormons are devoutly repressed while Jews are communist or devoted completely to the old country and its ways. Despite the fact that nobody remains free of criticism, Kushner gives his religious characters

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at least the modicum of respect that those living in a democratic society deserve.

Democracy itself, however, is up for debate here. Roy Cohn seems to think that democracy is only for the influential and is based on a serious hatred of enemies: communists, homosexuals and any other forces that stand opposed to conservative American values. Those values made him rich and he's indebted to them. That's why he happily pulled some strings to

get Ethel Rosenberg executed for her treason. This is his democracy and he refuses to accept any of its consequences. When Ethel's ghost pays him a visit he laughs at it and says, "better dead than red."

Despite slightly dated politics both directors note that *Angels* is quite relevant today. Dodd calls it "one of the great plays of the 20th century," and both directors mentioned that it is found in most of the current scholarly anthologies of drama.

"Drama teaches the history of the time in which it takes place," Jones, a professor of theater history, says. "Not only does *Angels* show us a moment in our political and social history, it also reminds us that today's world is built on these events and that the AIDS epidemic has grown and become even sadder."

Still, there is a message of hope in this play. Although Kushner's Angel is clearly non-denominational, she represents faith in the possibility of change for the better. Most of the characters find some kind of redemption. In the end judgment and punishment is reserved for those who remain knowingly duplicitous and untruthful, which is a rather nice worldview.

The design team on *Angels* have created an impressive atmosphere that fills up the new, larger Bas Bleu theater beautifully. The stage is strategically filled with found objects and platforms of various heights on which many different environments are created. With clever lighting, sound and other effects we are shown Central Park, a Brooklyn apartment, a South Bronx alley, Antarctica and Heaven.

Terry Dodd explains that the universal theme of this play is that "a society that does not take care of its own will collapse." The democratic values of America allow for us to take care of each other but whether we will remains to be seen. Differences of religion and politics are major hurdles that Americans need to overcome at least enough to prevent the collapse of our society. Lately, one aspect of society under constant threat is the Arts. This impressive collaboration of three regional theaters allowed *Angels In America* to be presented to Fort Collins audiences and that is a step in the right direction. **W**

Angels In America, Parts 1 & 2

Bas Bleu

401 Pine Street, Fort Collins

Fridays & Saturdays 7:30 p.m.

Select Thursdays 7:30 p.m.

Plays shown separately, through Nov. 20

\$17 Adults, \$12 Seniors, \$10 Students

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