

A Wing and a Prayer

Angels in America offers hope—a shred, at least.

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Editor's Note: See "Threshold of Revelation," October 14, for a discussion of *Angels in America*, Part I: Millennium Approaches.

"The great question for us is, 'Are we doomed?'" So inquires a Soviet elder before his comrades at the opening of *Angels in America*, Part II: *Perestroika*.

The answer, evidenced by history, is yes. Playwright Tony Kushner seems to be asking that question about America and all of humanity, and the answer is again and again a resounding "more than likely." But he does offer up hope, bit by bit, for an escape from our own demise.

Ask your average HBO viewer what *Angels in America* is about, and they might say: "It's about this stereotypical gay guy named Prior who gets AIDS and his lefty Jewish lover Louis leaves him for Joe the Republican Mormon law clerk who in turn leaves his wife Harper who goes crazy while Joe's well-connected Reaganite lawyer friend Roy dies from AIDS but Prior having been visited by an angel and told he is a prophet confronts an angry god to salvage his own fate and the fate of the world."

Or, they'll simply say: "AIDS." But the AIDS epidemic here is a flash-point, a bodily manifestation of all that's gone wrong with the world. *Angels* is about an America attacking itself from within, the syndrome of Reaganesque conservatism and religious extremism making us vulnerable to greed, hate, shame and denial.

Attorney Roy Cohn (Bruce K. Freestone) is the epitome of this pestilence—or more accurately an exaggeration—the man outwardly cast in the Gipper's image, but inwardly dying from the disease of deviants. That what remains of Roy's spiritual capital upon his death is transferred to an openly

homosexual Prior Walker (Todd Coulter), in the form of the then-experimental drug AZT, is telling of the direction Kushner sees America going if it is to redeem itself.

How Roy's protégé Joe Pitt (Darren R. Schroader) fits into the equation is as unclear as his eventual fate. Neither self-indulgent nor overtly intolerant, Joe is disappointed with himself, to say the least, for being gay, based on an innocent adherence to righteousness. His unease (read: *dis-ease*) dissipates only slightly by the end of the play, and Harper's (Laura Norman) response when he returns only compounds the creepy feeling that even though his straightedge mother Hannah (Denise Burson Freestone) and Prior become friends, the loose ends haven't been tied up, regardless of how tidily the play ends thanks to Prior.

Prior is a gay Jesus, the reluctant prophet of the '80s, as the angel (Wendy Ishii) reveals to him. Conveniently, he has the guilt-ridden Louis (Kurt Brighton) for a Judas, or perhaps a Peter, maybe even a Pontius Pilate. Louis sets Prior free to plumb the depths of deterioration, to explore, with the help of the angel, the desperation of humanity. Prior's final defiant affirmation of man in the face of a decadent grand jury of angels doesn't save the world, but he does leave open the option that the world could save itself, if it abandons its present course toward destruction—oh, and stops global warming.

Didactic, yes. And that could be the play's only downfall. The epilogue, especially, Prior's lecture to the bigots and money-grubbers, doesn't give the audience credit. Kushner's poorly constructed code throughout the play is only too decipherable; laying it out on the table for a finale only insults the playgoer, cheapens the experience (as in, "If that's all he wanted to tell me, why did I sit through six hours for it?").

Fortunately, the richness of the plot and the dialogue, made richer by one of the most skillful casts ever assembled at Bas Bleu, make the six hours worth it.

Terry Dodd, who directed *Perestroika* (Laura Jones directed *Part I: Millennium Approaches*), says its heavy-handedness is characteristic of plays that have a political message, like Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*.

"Kushner is first and foremost a political playwright," Dodd says. "Before being a gay playwright or anything else, he's political, and that is what a political play does."

"Subtlety, in some ways, I don't think is part of the package here."

Politics notwithstanding, Dodd has deftly charted the choppy waters of Kushner's story structure, blending hyperreality and surreality, the harshness of life with the fuzziness of dreams.

"A lot of *Millennium* is rooted more in a reality, and *Perestroika*'s a little like being on Roy's morphine drip," Dodd says.

Less grounded, more poetic and more obscure—also more playful—the second part, like the title's translation suggests, is a restructuring (destruction? deconstruction?) of events in the first.

If anything acts as a stay to the whirling plotline, besides the political message, it's the solid acting. Coulter adds a human dimension to a character bordering on gay stereotype, as does Leonard Barrett, Jr., who plays both Prior's friend Belize and Harper's imaginary travel agent.

Bruce Freestone almost intuitively makes the dreadful Cohn likable, even lovable, a



The Angel (Wendy Ishii) in bed with Prior Walker (Todd Coulter).

clever twist Kushner no doubt intended. And Brighton's brave portrayal of the pusillanimous Louis belies his inexperience relative to those he shares the stage with. Playing perhaps the most difficult roles, Schroader and Norman stand out in some indescribable way.

Further beyond words, though, is the synergy that the dames of local theatre, Bas Bleu's Ishii and OpenStage's Denise Freestone, bring to the stage, in both their major and minor characters, particularly when they're the only ones on stage—to say nothing of the orgasmic scene between the Angel and Hannah.

It does have its comic, and sexy, moments, but the tragic death and overwhelming bleakness of the play weigh it down so that no wings (and certainly not any whimsical epilogue) can bear it any higher than stoicism.

Oddly, and thankfully, this stoicism is felt: It gets under your skin, into the bloodstream and eats away at you from the inside. ♦♦♦♦♦

Angels in America is a collaboration between Bas Bleu Theatre, OpenStage Theatre and Colorado State University's Theatre Program. Parts I and II are showing separately Friday and Saturday nights, with select Thursday and Sunday shows, through November 20, at the Bas Bleu Theatre's new location, 401 Pine Street, Fort Collins. Call for 970/498-8949 for showtimes and tickets. Adult admission is \$17, \$12 for seniors and \$10 for students.