

'Angels' soars in Bas Bleu's new home

By **MAGGIE HALL WALSH**

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You don't need a large stage to put on a big show.

Three local production companies are proving that as they present "Angels in America," Tony Kushner's Pulitzer

Prize and Tony Award-winning

Review

two-part megadrama.

With superb acting, creative costuming and the intimacy that only a smaller stage can bring, Bas Bleu Theatre, OpenStage Theatre Company and the Colorado State University theater program bring a compelling account of AIDS in the 1980s to Fort Collins.

The story told in "Angels in America" is difficult to watch. "Part I: Millennium Approaches" deals with betrayal, abandonment, isolation and despair. People lie to each other and themselves, and a couple of them are dying of AIDS. The language is adult and sexual, and some scenes depict homosexuality.



Courtesy Bas Bleu Theatre

VERSATILE: Wendy Ishii, left, as Sister Ella Chapter, and Denise Burson Freestone, as Hannah Pitt, each play several roles in 'Angels in America: Millennium Approaches.'

But it's also funny and edgy, with small kernels of dialogue that make you hope — and maybe even believe — that something good might happen to these characters.

The actors are tailored to their roles, and many of the eight actors play at least two characters.

It would be hard to cast Harper and Joe, the young Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints couple, better than they have been in this production. Their marriage is disintegrating under the realization that Joe is gay. Laura

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On stage

"Angels in America" — Performances of "Part I: Millennium Approaches" are Sunday, Oct. 29 and 30, Nov. 4, 6, 11, 12, 19 and 20. Performances of "Part II: Perestroika" are Friday, Saturday, Oct. 28 and 30, Nov. 5, 6, 13, 14, 18 and 20, Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St. Tickets are \$25 Friday. Tickets for all other performances are \$17 for adults, \$12 for seniors age 65 and up and \$10 for students. Information: 498-8949.

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Angels

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Norman, as Harper, is sweet down to the dimples in her cheeks, and her Valium-affected dialogue and adventurous hallucination scenes immediately endear her to the audience. Darren R. Schroader, as Joe, is a Mormon man trying to do right with perfect posture, parted hair and a secret that's destroying life as he knows it.

Prior, a gay man dying of AIDS alone after his partner leaves him, is wonderfully played by Todd Coulter. The boyish-looking actor gives Prior a sweet disposition and likability that bring pity to his character and contempt for anyone who would do him harm.

Leonard Barrett, Jr. is the calm in the life storm as Belize, the levelheaded nurse. He also brings a dynamic and attention-grabbing presence as Mr. Lies, the animated travel agent drummed up by Harper's pill-popping imagination.

Kurt Brighton plays Louis, a gay man who can't handle the

thought of watching his lover die of AIDS and leaves him. Brighton is pouty and believable as the self-absorbed Louis, who can't seem to say anything that isn't politically incorrect or just plain mean.

Bruce K. Freestone is a wonderful Roy, the foul-mouthed, sleazy lawyer who won't accept his AIDS diagnosis — he calls it liver cancer — and believes he can manipulate anyone or anything in his way.

Denise Burson Freestone, plays several roles and performs each with individuality. As Hannah, a Mormon mother who's determined to repair her son's doomed marriage; she looks and acts as if she just got off a plane from Salt Lake City.

When Wendy Ishii appears larger than life as the angel in the play's final scene, with her gigantic wings, big hair and hypnotic voice, she makes you hope that if a heavenly visitor were to descend from the ceiling into your bedroom, it would be her.

Almost as amazing as the acting in "Millennium Approaches," is that the actors

are rehearsing Part II of "Angels" while they perform Part I and that, beginning Friday, the shows will overlap. That's seven hours of theater for both productions. Part I is directed by Laura Jones, CSU director of theatre. Part II is directed by Denver's Terry Dodd.

"Millennium Approaches" is long — three-and-a-half hours with two 10-minute intermissions — but the comfy seats and ample legroom at the new Bas Bleu keeps the fanny-fatigue factor pretty low.

The stage is divided into five sections, each lit nicely when in use, and the numerous scene changes in the play are pulled off flawlessly, with gentle music played in the background. The stage area is not completely darkened between scenes, which means audience members can see the actors and props taking their places, which may be somewhat distracting to some. However, because there are so many scene changes, a completely darkened stage might seem too harsh and even more depressing.