

ANGELS IN AMERICA: THE GREAT WORK CONTINUES

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Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is very much a protest statement. Written during the 1980s and produced in the early 1990s, the play expresses Kushner's distaste for many aspects of Reagan-era society. The widespread ignorance of the AIDS crisis, the predominant political conservatism, and the collective fear of the new millennium had, in Kushner's view, corrupted and halted social evolution. Yet the play puts these controversial and often overwhelming problems in a deeply personal context. Not only was the play inspired, in part, by "Kushner's own belated and somewhat difficult coming out as a gay man," but it also focuses on just a few characters played by eight actors (McGrath 5). This ability to openly and intimately explore subjects that many people were unwilling to confront captured the attention of Broadway audiences and critics. The two-part original Broadway production—*Millennium Approaches* in 1993 and *Perestroika* in 1994—collectively won seven Tony awards, eight Drama Desk awards, and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama ("Theatre Legends").

America in 2018 is vastly different from the one represented in *Angels in America*. Reagan has been out of the White House for nearly thirty years. AIDS is no longer seen as a death sentence. Same-sex marriage is legal nationwide. It would seem that the play and its issues would no longer resonate with the general public. However, the most recent revival, the 2017 production by London's Royal National Theatre, received as much reverence as the original Broadway show. After transferring to Broadway for a limited run this year, *Angels in America* won another three Tony awards and another three Drama Desk awards ("*Angels in America*"). The response was so great that the show was filmed and released as *National Theatre Live: Angels in America*. What is it about this play that has managed to transcend the limitations of time? Why does it still strike a deep, emotional chord in a world that has seemingly evolved past the problems against which the play protests?

Maybe one answer is that Kushner possesses a paradoxical aptitude for creating hyper-realistic characters in extreme and even surreal circumstances and settings. Though the characters often find themselves in extraordinary situations, each one remains true and sympathetic. Perhaps the most complex character is Harper Pitt, an agoraphobic Mormon woman with an addiction to Valium married to a man who is questioning his sexuality. On paper, she may sound like an incredibly specific character to whom very few people could relate. However, Kushner uses Harper as a conduit to explore primal fears that exist in every single person. Like all of us, she employs methods of escapism, both the creation of an imaginary friend and the reliance on Valium, to cope with her fear and loneliness. The first time we see her, she is cowering alone in her dark apartment, barely visible under the illumination of blue neon lights. She explains how the ozone layer protects life on Earth from UV rays as “a shell of safety for life itself.” However, we have caused it to deteriorate by releasing gases from aerosol cans. The shield is “crumbling,” and Harper worries that human life will soon be wiped out. She is unable to calm herself until her husband Joe returns home late in the night (*National Theatre*).

Harper’s rant, at a glance, merely seems to be an example of her dependence on her husband. In reality, Kushner explores her anxieties to set up his discussion of the AIDS crisis. The process of ozone depletion is eerily similar to the way AIDS affects one’s health. The patient’s immune system is like the ozone layer: it protects from infections, or “UV rays,” that may otherwise threaten one’s life. The introduction of the HIV virus, like the introduction of pollutants such as aerosol cans, causes the system to collapse. The patient becomes susceptible to a variety of otherwise non-lethal diseases. By mirroring the effects of AIDS with the deterioration of the ozone layer, Kushner visualizes the tragedy of AIDS for those who do not have a personal experience with it. In turn, such an analogy invites the audience to imagine AIDS as a disease that impacts everyone, a tragedy to which we are all vulnerable.

Such vulnerability can be frightening, and in many ways Kushner’s play is a study of our personal and collective fears. Harper’s anxiety, one could argue, is rooted in a fear of change. She desperately wants to return to a “simpler” time when the ozone layer was intact rather than to deal with the consequences of its depletion. Another character, Louis Ironson, pleads to God to cure his boyfriend Prior Walter’s AIDS because Louis cannot tolerate the lifestyle changes associat-

ed with the disease. Many of the characters see change as an inherently negative process. To distance themselves from the trauma associated with change, they hide behind an armor of apathy; after all, if you do not care about something, then any negative changes surrounding it cannot cause you emotional distress. We see Harper numb herself with Valium. And although Louis initially cares for his sick lover, he later deserts Prior. He insists, both to himself and to his peers, that he never truly loved Prior and only cried “crocodile tears” for him. Further lashing out, Louis condemns the government for their insensitivity towards the gay community during the AIDS crisis. They were tolerated, but not cared for, and “it’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan, you find out how much tolerance is worth: nothing” (*National Theatre*).

In this way, Kushner examines apathy not just as a personal defense mechanism, but a societal one. We see the play toggle between the private and the political, at once empathizing with the unnoticed suffering of a few while condemning the collective ignorance of the many—an ignorance fueled by the government. Despite the lethality of AIDS in the gay community, Reagan neglected to comment on it during the first five years of his presidency. As thousands of Americans with the illness lost their lives, the President pitched the idea of the “all-American family” as a return to normalcy after civil, gender, and gay rights protests in the 60s and 70s (McLaughlin). This “ideal” family typically consisted of a mother, a father, and two children. It rejected the notion that homosexuals existed, let alone should be treated the same way as heterosexuals.

Because AIDS was initially most prevalent among the gay community, to promote AIDS research and treatment would be to undermine Reagan’s values. Kushner expresses his outrage at this neglect in the voice of Prior, who claims, “We don’t [matter]; faggots; we’re just a bad dream the real world is having” (*National Theatre*). Prior’s declaration points to grim realities: The government, while not actively persecuting the gay community it sees as weak and deranged, contributed to the thousands of deaths due to its neglect of AIDS research. By portraying the consequences that such apathy has on the gay community, the play urges viewers to listen to its characters’ messages and spread awareness about the disease themselves.

As I consider the recent stage production, I wonder: Did Kushner’s message of awareness work? Do we find ourselves in a more tolerant America? Unfortunately, the same callous sentiments hold true, albeit in a slightly different

context. Today we find ourselves in an equally divisive political climate of fear and apathy. In fact, one of the more bigoted characters in the play, Roy Cohn, “the Red-baiting lawyer and political fixer . . . a villain so monstrous and hypocritical that you couldn’t take your eyes off him,” was based on a real attorney of the same name who formerly counseled Donald Trump. As Kushner reflects in a New York Times interview: “You can’t hear the things Roy is saying in the play about loyalty and not think about the Babylonian mud devil in the White House, who has no loyalty to anyone, not even to Roy” (McGrath 5).

For these first two years of his presidency, Trump has neglected to acknowledge June as LGBTQ Pride Month, as Clinton and Obama had before him. Like Reagan, he has not properly emphasized AIDS research; he actually worked against it by disbanding the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS established in 1995. Most tragically, he has shown incredible ignorance about the struggles that transgender people face. In July 2017, claiming that the medical costs for their transitions were too expensive, Trump proposed a ban on transgender soldiers from serving in the military (Fitzsimons). Just as Reagan dehumanized gay men by withholding money from AIDS research, Trump contributes to this continued dehumanization of transgender people by valuing money over thousands of potential soldiers. So, just as before, the duty of raising awareness has fallen upon the shoulders of the public, especially artists. *Angels in America* has been revived successfully because the anger towards the government for dehumanizing a minority group has unfortunately resurged; the details of the government’s treatment may be different, but the tactics remain uncannily similar.

Both Reagan and Trump exploited and even nurtured this hatred to advance their own campaigns. Taking advantage of the public’s fear of change, they promoted a return to a simpler time. Trump’s slogan, “make America great again,” has appealed to white America’s displeasure with the seemingly unstable social changes of the last few decades. Because groups such as immigrants, African Americans, and LGBTQ people have been fighting for equal rights, those already in privileged positions feel threatened. According to psychologist John T. Jost’s “uncertainty-threat model,” political conservatism, exemplified by the “make America great again” campaign, finds support when there’s a popular psychological fear of uncertainty. Because liberalism is generally associated with disorder and protest, it is unpopular when the general public feels threatened by a minority group (Mehta 1). However, during both of these periods, people have

overlooked the fact that America was only “great” for elite groups, particularly straight white men, who project their fears onto minorities. These liberal ideas may appear dangerous to the elite, but in reality, it is more dangerous to prevent those minorities from gaining their rights, as inequality can lead to abuses of power.

When the Angel of America arrives to deliver her prophecy to Prior in this newest revival, she is terrifying. Crashing into Prior’s bedroom, destroying his ceiling in the process, she appears as monstrous and polluted: her hair is gray and mangy, her wings ashen and tattered, her body covered in grime. This is not the typical delicate and holy Christian angel; rather, she evokes fear wherever she goes and brings distressing news rather than salvation. She explains to Prior that the process of human movement and innovation has caused heaven to crumble. She demands that Prior advocate for a return to a static and safe society, or else the “fields of slaughter” will continue to wreak havoc over America (*National Theatre*). The Angel’s warning mirrors the fears of many conservatives and evangelical Christians: social change is dangerous, and America should return to the way it was before.

But there’s no going back for Kushner’s characters. Joe Pitt, Harper’s husband, is a Republican Mormon who comes out as gay. He tries to explain to his loved ones that he has always been gay and is finally embracing his true self, but he is met by resistance. His mother Hannah denies that he ever came out to her. His mentor and father figure Roy (the same Roy Cohn who once mentored Donald Trump) demands that he reconcile with his wife in order to save himself. Harper abandons him and chooses to be homeless rather than to live with her phony husband any longer. This backlash forces Joe back into the closet as he tries to go on living just like he had before. In his last scene, his wife Harper leaves him alone, consumed by grief. Giving him her bottle of Valium, she tells him to “go exploring.” We last see him alone in his apartment, staring forlornly at the bottle of pills (*National Theatre*). Joe represents the conservative mindset that this play critiques. When he comes out, his life seems to become much more negative and uncertain. Rather than accepting his true self and the new life that comes with it, he tries to go back to the more “ideal” time in his life. This does not give him a happy ending, however. Instead, he is left behind by everyone else who is ready to embrace an uncertain future.

On the other hand, Prior gains the courage to reject the Angel's prophecy. He visits heaven and explains to all of the angels that humans were meant to move and progress. Even though change may be scary, it is a vital part of life. Trying to prevent change just causes more discomfort. Even when the Angel explains to him that life will just be more painful for him from now on, Prior explains, "I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much worse, but...you see them living anyway" (*National Theatre*). He begs them to bless him with "more life." In the epilogue, he seems happy, joining his friends in Central Park. By accepting the changes along with the new millennium, including the new lifestyle he has adopted to cope with AIDS (along with a little help from the drug AZT), Prior has been able to live with the disease for five years. He finally addresses the audience directly, declaring that change must be accepted. "The world only spins forward," he declares, so fighting the inevitable change will ultimately be ineffective and harmful (*National Theatre*). Prior becomes the spokesperson for the liberal protest. By persevering through change, he ends up much happier than Joe. Kushner, in writing this ending, advocates for liberalism and exposes the poisonous nature of conservatism. He also shows that, with the compassion to research AIDS and develop treatments, the tragic pestilence can be contained.

In today's "make America great again" world, the same toxic nostalgia for a "better" time is prevalent. However, Kushner argues that it is important to realize that this "better" time is gone and can never come back (and, in reality, never really existed for a majority of Americans). It is perhaps even more important now to realize this than it was under Reagan. Kushner's work continues to provoke empathy in its audience because it truly represents the one constant in life: Nothing is constant, and the changeability that is a natural part of life must be embraced rather than rejected. But there has always been, and most likely will always be, a regression back into conservatism after a liberal period. Clearly, protest art alone is not enough to change an entire country's mindset: citizens must continue to work alongside it to make sure rights are preserved. Kushner's message represents an idealistic view of America, one that will probably never come to life. Perhaps no amount of art and protest will ever truly erase our fear of change. Then again, no amount of fear and regression will ever truly break the spirits of the protestors. Conservatives are too scared of change to relent in their fight against it, just as liberals are too scared of stagnation to stop protesting. In

Tony Kushner's words, "You're scared. So am I. Everyone is, in the land of the free" (*National Theatre*). But one mark of freedom, I think, is the power to recognize fear and to speak about it out loud. That's how any change begins to happen.

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