
Blessed with More Life

**On directing Tony Kushner's
Angels in America
by Susan L. Chast**

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WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER in 4-H, I directed dramatic scenes for the county fair in Greene County, NY, beginning an activity that was to become a way of life for me. By 1974 I was calling myself a director; by 1983 I was also a convinced Quaker, but I didn't consider my stage directing either an art or a spiritual ministry up until a few years ago. I saw directing as a community-building activity, i.e. a political activity. Productions can be "mere" entertainment or timely in some way, but they always move participants to care about and to know each other as they play together.

However, when I began to write and perform my own work as an answer to a specific leading in 1997, I realized that the particular power of theater to create community had to do with its peculiar nature as an art. With the actor and human body as the core, it works through moving images—spatial, aural, and visual images. And the art of directing is a paradoxically calculated and still mysterious manipulation of images that breathe life into each performance and then touch other lives.

By the time I directed Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in 1998 and faced the critical controversy that arose, I was questioning my identities as educator, artist, and Quaker, seeking to understand how I live each through the other in a spiral of experience. What has the life of an artist to do with simplicity? With faith? With staying on the path? *Angels* reminded me how important theater can be as a ministry as well as a community-building activity.



WHY DIRECT *Angels in America* ? An epic two-part drama by Tony Kushner, a gay and Jewish writer, the whole subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." In Part One, a constellation of characters seems doomed by their own confusions while an Angel delivers odd messages to a gay man struggling with the dual issues of AIDS and his lover's desertion. In Part Two, one man dies of AIDS and the remaining characters confront the Angels only to learn they are to be "blessed with more life." Controversy ensued in a few of the performance locations of Part One: *The Millennium Approaches*, Part Two: *Perestroika*, or both together. The production at Catholic University was thrown off campus and in danger of oblivion before being rescued by

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the Arena Stage. The production in Charlottesville proceeded despite attempts by the town government to abort its run.

In my department at the College of William and Mary, students and faculty examined this track record seriously. Concerns raised by the play include not only homosexual characters and context, but on-stage sex and nudity. As I was to discover, another problem is the dialogue. One character based on a historical figure, Roy Cohn, speaks in the foulest expletives. The play, however, is also a Pulitzer Prize winner produced to rave reviews in New York City and multiple locations in the USA and in England.

My own connection with the play has to do with none of this. To me the play deals brilliantly and pervasively with one of the hardest topics open to any spiritual person: how to incorporate the existence of evil and suffering with an idea of God. The epic saga of the play reveals a constellation of Protestant, Mormon, Jewish, and also spiritually impoverished characters trying to imagine a world where spirit and love can grow in new relationship while what seems to be civilization falls apart around them. Some are gay and some are sick and some are crazy and all are open to experience the Light in some small way. Kushner examines these timely questions in a theatrical, non-sermonizing way. "Wow" is my overall reaction to the text; "We accomplished all this?" was my reaction to our production. "Wow" is even now my response as the production still resonates in my life. In fact, the pain that arose during rehearsals, performance, and aftermath is intricately bound up with the joy of participation in the ministry.

AFTER I CHOSE THE SCRIPT, an issue arose before casting and moving into rehearsal. I am not a gay man. How could I ensure that we were understanding that world? I had been warned by the chair of my department not to discriminate in casting. How could I, anyway, put the question, "And, are you gay?" on the casting form? Luckily, one of the cast did turn out to be gay and willing to talk about it, while most of the students I knew to be gay avoided the casting call. The staging of this play would have "outed" them too much. I called the Williamsburg AIDS Network for research into AIDS treatments and progress within the body and sent the props people and the make-up people there. The Network made both gay and non-gay advisors available, and held a benefit dinner and celebration on our opening night. Similarly, to extend our research, rehearsals included visits from Mormons, tapes from local old world Hebrews to give us their dialect and views on the Kaddish, and visits from professional nurses.

My students were more eager for discovery through experience than I was, and this made rehearsal constantly challenging for me. Each had to sign a statement that they were aware of the content and demands of the play (including the sex and nudity), before being cast and before accepting the role. They had a chance to reconsider before each of the difficult scenes came up in rehearsal and again before technical rehearsals began (when others would begin to see what had resulted from our rehearsal process). When I suggested dropping the nudity, we discussed the context of the medical examination in which it occurred and concluded that the rest of the play romanticized AIDS too much. Without a visual encounter with the humility of real physical

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exposure and ravaging disease, the audience would not "get" the truth. The makeup for this 30-second scene took three hours of two make-up artists' time for EACH performance. The scene touched me with its truth every time: our very own bodies as the site of betrayal.

Similarly, we retained the sordid sex scene after talking about it from many angles. I felt that, given the depth of love challenged throughout the play, the only image of sexuality should not be a jerk-off type pick-up scene in the park. Students saw my point, but also valued the issue of safe sex and condoms, and the importance of the characters' denial of their fear of life. And together we saw that Kushner had intended this scene to show the true nature of the simultaneous scene on stage: a "business" meeting between two men, where the older and politically sophisticated Roy Cohn tries to seduce a young Mormon man with his perverted vision of success. The two scenes worked together but not separately. We found a way to do the sex scene far upstage and obscured by shadows, but the explicit dialogue still rankled me. It is the one scene in our production that I did not feel I had adequately solved as a director, though I believe the students were right to insist upon it.

So you see, the rehearsal itself was vibrant with learning. We discussed our attitudes toward God, homosexuality, and other things—though we never could speak outwardly and openly about sex itself. We dealt with individual cast members facing the assumption that they were gay by their peers and with the sudden defacing of our posters and the potential for hate crimes. We became a strong community of support. The five weeks of rehearsal for our staging of Part One and reading of Part Two were a blessing of constant revelation in a spiritual community. Indeed, by the time the production opened, I had forgotten to fear anything from the public.

THE GALA OPENING provided marvelous audience response. We all soared and congratulated ourselves backstage. So the angel got stuck in the fly rail, so the burning book didn't burn. The audience had entered into the spirit of the work. Bravo! I stood outside during the intermissions on that and on subsequent nights and watched the early departures. More had left during my previous production, Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, a play whose slow movement I love fiercely but one that many find boring. Similar audience response enlivened each showing. The lobby books I had provided for immediate audience feedback gained a few comments and most of them were positive.

The following Wednesday, a marvelously positive review was buried in the local *Virginia Gazette*, while the front page banner read boldly: "AUDIENCE WALKS OUT OF GAY PLAY." The opening line in the lead article posed the question "When does entertainment cross the line to become a gratuitous attempt to shock the audience?" While the article was a balanced interview and report that included comments from the chair of the Theatre Department and myself as well as from those who resented exposure to *Angels*, the headline and its placement earned the response the paper so clearly desired. For the next four weeks, signed letters to the editor and anonymous phone comments debating this issue became the paper's selling point. Since the College of William and Mary's Board of Visitors met when the first paper hit the press

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and questioned W&M's association with the play, the top administration of the college had to investigate our activities. To their credit, once the college officials determined that we had a conscientious decision-making process in choosing our season's plays, they defended the department's actions.

In retrospect, I see the debate as the production doing its job. At the time, it merely frightened me. It seemed to have nothing to do with the art or its issues and everything to do with individual ideas of propriety and morality. A few people actually called for my resignation and the dismissal of the department chair who had supported my work. Some pointed out in our defense that the publicity had been explicit and that audience members had a choice about whether or not to attend. Some wrote to say the play and the production were intriguing, but did not belong in a state-funded institution in general or W&M in particular. Many wrote to decry the play based on hearsay, condemning the school and the play although they had not attended. These frightened me the most and I imagined demonstrations outside my house (which did not occur). For example, one letter quoted de Tocqueville in saying that by ceasing to be good, W&M could no longer be great. It determined, based on the newspaper debate, that the play was salacious, and the message obscure because of the characters and language that were its vehicles. My departmental colleagues actually became silent around this controversy, though I discovered later that a few of them attributed the unusual student and audience responsiveness and excellent review to the contemporary popularity and intrigue of an otherwise uninteresting script.

At Friends Meeting, few had seen the production. Of those who did, one still reminds me of scenes that moved her. Another had lent me AIDS posters from around the world to use in a special concurrent exhibit. But more generally the response was unease. I remember, for example, sitting at a Baltimore YM spiritual formation dinner once the newspaper reaction was in full force, and being told "I did not see your play, but from what the papers said, I wonder that you did it. Don't parents have something to say about what their children do? I wouldn't want my child in this production." At that moment, I could not see this response as part of the gift of ministry nor could I answer that of God in the questioner.

BUT AT THE VERY LEAST—maybe at the most—this is the space that opened among people as part of the event: a space for examining assumptions in the light of our contemporary news and within the Light of God. When this space opens, how ready are we to enter it? How invested are we, as individuals and as a society, in preventing the harder questions of our lives to arise?

When I overcame my fear toward and disappointment in some of the responses and began to weigh in the positive responses (such as "great acting," "beautiful images," "tender," "brave," "great choice," and "thank you"), I began to look for a larger forum in which to continue the debate and raise such questions as: "What do you look for in the theater and in other arts and fictions? In what ways can we come to know our neighbors? How do you try to imagine the future?" I wanted audience members, performers, and others to gather inside the territory of the arts to continue the debate.

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Except in my classes, this was not to be. One response letter made this failure particularly poignant to me. The writer saw in our fine production the use of AIDS as a metaphor for fear and loneliness. He mentioned a friend who had died of AIDS and how he had seen this friend's face in one of the staged characters. He offered to help lead discussions among people of all ages for three reasons: to publically discuss being gay in America, to join the college with the town, and to have the conversations necessary to help Kushner's "forward dawning" to occur. I hope he was able to pursue the "forward dawning" even though my own spiritual work led me in another direction.

When I performed my own solo work in summer 1999 at FGC's Lemonade Gallery, the playing opened me like a prayer and enfolded me with God. Afterwards, I sat down to explain, small again, forgetting everything I knew about trusting the art and its images, about trusting the audience. Finally two spectators stopped me to ask if I was interested in hearing their responses. I finally sat back and listened. As with *Angels in America*, parts of the work were praised and parts criticized, and, as with *Angels*, the deepest aspects of the response included viewers' comments from their own lives as they related to the images on the stage.

It is in this open conversation that I feel—beyond embarrassment, apology, and explanation—gratitude for the leading that has brought me to a ministry through theater. In the last *Types & Shadows*, Jennifer Elam spoke my mind when she said, "I was in awe of God's work in my life." Resistance and pain accompany the joy, and the twists and turns of events are part of the blessing.

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