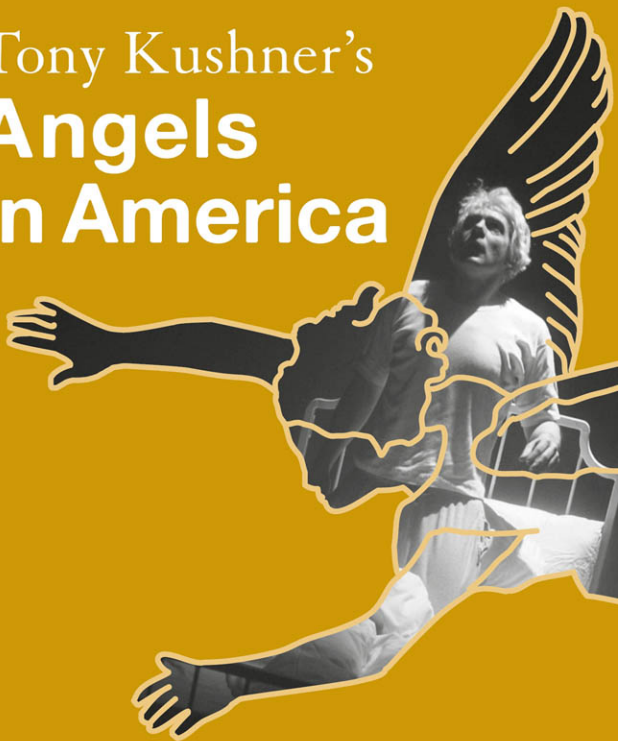


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modern theatre guides

Tony Kushner's  
**Angels  
in America**



KEN NIELSEN

B L O O M S B U R Y

**Tony Kushner's**  
***Angels in America***

## Modern Theatre Guides

*Bloomsbury Modern Theatre Guides* offer concise, accessible and informed introductions to the key plays of modern times. Each book is carefully structured to offer a systematic study of the play in its biographical, historical, social and political context, an in-depth study of the text, an overview of the work's production history including screen adaptations, and practical workshopping exercises. They also include a timeline and suggestions for further reading which highlight key critical approaches.

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**Tony Kushner's**  
***Angels in America***

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I also thank my partner David Smedley for his patience with me and love of change. Onwards and Upwards.



# General Preface

## **Bloomsbury Modern Theatre Guides**

Volumes in the series Bloomsbury Modern Theatre Guides offer concise and informed introductions to the key plays of modern times. Each book takes a close look at one particular play's dramaturgical qualities and then at its various theatrical manifestations. The books are carefully structured to offer a systematic study of the play in its biographical, historical, social and political context, followed by an in-depth study of the text and a chapter which outlines the work's production history, examining both the original productions of the play and subsequent major stage interpretations. Where relevant, screen adaptations will also be analysed. There then follows a chapter dedicated to workshopping the play, based on suggested group exercises. Also included are a timeline and suggestions for further reading.

Each book covers:

- Background and context
- Analysis of the play
- Production history
- Workshopping exercises

The aim is to provide accessible introductions to modern plays for students in both Theatre/Performance Studies and English, as well as for informed general readers. The series includes up-to-date coverage of a broad range of key plays, with summaries of important critical approaches and the intellectual debates that have illuminated the meaning of the work and made a significant contribution

to our broader cultural life. They will enable readers to develop their understanding of playwrights and theatre-makers, as well as inspiring them to broaden their studies.

The Editors:

Steve Barfield, Janelle Reinelt,  
Graham Saunders and Aleks Sierz

March 2008

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# 1 Background and Context

This chapter is an introduction to the study of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. *Angels in America* consists of two different parts: *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. This book introduces and analyses both plays. When described together the title *Angels in America* is used and when described individually the separate titles will be used. This chapter explains why the play is important in terms of its theatrical legacy and international importance, gives an introduction to the author's biography, and describes the social, cultural and political background of the play.

## Introduction

*Angels in America* is arguably the most important American play to be produced in the past 20 years. From the moment *Millennium Approaches*, the first play in *Angels in America*, exploded onto the American (and international) stage, Tony Kushner became the most talked about contemporary playwright in America, at the time heralded as both a great revolutionizer and a saviour of the American theatre. The play was, once produced, instantly recognized; *Millennium Approaches* won a Tony Award for best play in 1993; *Perestroika* won a Tony Award for the best play in 1994, and Tony Kushner was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for best drama in 1993 for *Millennium Approaches*. *Angels in America* seemed to energize the critics in a way that the American theatre had not been able to for a long time. In his review of the first complete production of *Angels in America*

## 2 Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in November of 1992 the influential theatre critic for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich, wrote that 'Some visionary playwrights want to change the world. Some want to revolutionize the theater. Tony Kushner, the remarkably gifted 36-year-old author of "Angels in America," is that rarity of rarities: a writer who has the promise to do both' (Rich, 1992). Rich's reaction represents a general tendency towards hyperbole in the initial critical reception of *Angels in America*. John Lahr of the *New Yorker*, for example, called *Perestroika* 'a Masterpiece' and claimed that 'not since Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage' (Lahr, 1993: 133), obviously drawing parallels between Tony Kushner and Tennessee Williams, author of iconic American plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

What seemed so appealing about Tony Kushner was the way he galvanized disparate elements and historical movements of and within the American theatre. *Angels in America* is of epic and tragic proportions, not unlike Eugene O'Neill's mammoth plays such as *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude*, dealing with the inner workings, functions, and histories of individuals, couples and families. At the same time it utilizes the Brechtian elements of the popular political theatre of the 1930s such as Clifford Odet's play *Waiting for Lefty*, and Marc Blitzstein's anti-capitalist musical *The Cradle Will Rock*. Also, Kushner uses elements of Tennessee Williams's lyricism in the creation of characters, particular in Harper who is as lost and delusional as Blanche Dubois in her search for love and belonging (besides, of course, giving Prior the famous line 'I've always depended on the kindness of strangers' from *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a direct homage to Williams). Furthermore, Kushner actively borrows from conventions of musical theatre and theatrical spectacle to create a fast-paced production featuring such spectacles as steel books, flaming letters, a vision of heaven as a decrepit

San Francisco, and, not least, the Angel crashing through Prior's bedroom ceiling.

Another way of judging the importance of a piece of theatre is to look at the controversies sparked by it. *Angels in America* has definitely caused its part of controversy both in terms of censored or contested productions and in terms of scholarship. Historian of gay theatre John Clum, for example, calls the play 'the most talked about, written about, and awarded, play of the past decade or more', 'a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture', and nothing less than 'a turning point for the inevitable, eternal, if turbulent relationship of gayness and theater, the climax of this chapter of its history' (Clum, 2000: 249, 257). Though most often celebrated, scholars have also found the play to be problematic. British critic, Alan Sinfield, though sympathetic to Kushner's politics and project, says 'My misgiving is that *Angels in America* slides into the cloudiness of irony, symbolism, and produndity [*sic*] at moments where clear elucidation would be valuable' and he questions whether or not the hope that is expressed at the end of *Perestroika* rings true. Sinfield asks whether 'a state that has depended on extreme violence in its founding, consolidation, continental expansion and global hegemony can realize, from within the ideology that has shaped it, a future that will be harmonious as well as purposeful' (Sinfield, 1999: 205, 207). Several productions of *Angels in America* have sparked controversy as well, particularly in the American regional theatre. The first major controversy over a production of *Angels in America* took place at the Charlotte Repertory Theatre which staged both plays in 1996 but was met with protests from Reverend Joseph R. Chambers who opposed the performances because of his anti-pornography belief and what he took to be the play's blasphemy. Besides the subject matter as such the Reverend particularly found the simulated sex and Prior's nudity, however brief, to be offensive (Fisher, 2002: 89).

### **International success**

Before *Angels in America* opened on Broadway in April of 1993 *Millennium Approaches* was performed in London in a critically acclaimed production at the National Theatre. This early production was an indicator of the tremendous success that *Angels in America* would have internationally with performances all over the world. It might seem peculiar that a play so specifically American would spark such international interest. It certainly did to Tony Kushner himself who explained to Adam Mars-Jones in an interview at the National Theatre on 24 January 1992; 'The play felt so much addressed to Americans and about America that I never really imagined it was going to go anywhere else' (Mars-Jones, 1998: 20). However, I believe that the international success of *Angels in America* must be seen as a combination of a renewed interest in America after the Cold War, the prevalence of American popular culture throughout the world and the immense theatrical qualities in the play itself. More than any other American play from the last two decades, *Angels in America* intrigued an international audience and offered insights into the world's then only remaining superpower. It offered new insights into a nation that people around the world already felt they knew very well.

### **Investigating America at a critical point**

*Angels in America* appeared at a time where the world-order that had been in place since the Second World War seemed to be crumbling. The Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989 creating a symbolic end to the Cold War, the Soviet Union disappeared almost overnight and in the USA Reaganism was displaced as Bill Clinton took office and promised a new America in 1993. At the beginning of the 1980s Ronald Reagan had been elected President of the USA using the slogan of 'morning in America', promising a renewed optimism, and exorbitant consumerism combined with lower taxes and supply-side economics. Tony Kushner describes this era as being essentially