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Approaching The Millennium: Essays On Angels In America (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance)



Synopsis

Tony Kushner's complex and demanding play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* has been the most talked about, analyzed, and celebrated play of the decade. The critic Harold Bloom has included Kushner's play in his "Western canon" alongside Shakespeare and the Bible, and drama scholar John M. Clum has termed it "a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture." While we might be somewhat wary of the instant canonization that such critical assessments confer, clearly Kushner's play is an important work, honored by the Pulitzer Prize, thought worthy of recognition on "purely aesthetic" grounds at the same time that it has been embraced--and occasionally rejected--for its politics.Â Kushner's play explicitly positions itself in the current American conflict over identity politics, yet also situates that debate in a broader historical context: the American history of McCarthyism, of immigration and the "melting pot," of westward expansion, and of racist exploitation. Furthermore, the play enters into the politically volatile struggles of the AIDS crisis, struggles themselves interconnected with the politics of sexuality, gender, race, and class.Â The original essays in *Approaching the Millennium* explore the complexities of the play and situate it in its particular, conflicted historical moment. The contributors help us understand and appreciate the play as a literary work, as theatrical text, as popular cultural phenomenon, and as political reflection and intervention. Specific topics include how the play thematizes gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity; the postmodern incarnation of the Brechtian epic; AIDS and the landscape of American politics. The range of different international productions of *Angels in America* provides a rich basis for discussion of its production history, including the linguistic and cultural shifts required in its "translation" from one stage to the next.Â The last section of *Approaching the Millennium* includes interviews with Tony Kushner and other key creators and players involved in the original productions of *Angels*. The interviews explore issues raised earlier in the volume and dialogues between the creative artists who have shaped the play and the critics and "theatricians" engaged in responding to it.Â Contributors to this volume are Arnold Aronson, Art Borreca, Gregory W. Bredbeck, Michael Cadden, Nicholas de Jongh, Allen J. Frantzen, Stanton B. Garner, Deborah R. Geis, Martin Harries, Steven F. Kruger, James Miller, Framji Minwalla, Donald Pease, Janelle Reinelt, David RomÃ¡n, David Savran, Ron Scapp, and Alisa Solomon.Â Deborah Geis is Associate Professor of English, Queens College, City University of New York. Steven F. Kruger is Professor and Chair of the Department of English, Queens College, City University of New York.

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Customer Reviews

Seldom has a new work of dramatic literature been discussed by scholars as widely and quickly as Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning *Angels in America*. One scholar termed it "a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture." The breadth of the play's thematic concerns, the originality of its construction and characterizations, and the multiple ambivalences of its message guarantee that it will provoke stimulating critical and scholarly discussion. These two volumes—the first works devoted entirely to Kushner to be published in the United States—represent a major step in the canonization of Kushner's "Gay Fantasia on National Themes." Geis and Kruger (both English, Queens Coll., CUNY) have grouped 18 essays—only two of which are reprints—into four categories: the play's political and historical themes; issues of racial, ethnic, and religious identity; apocalypse and the millennium; and performance contexts. Though all 18 are stimulating, the academic prose makes the collection appropriate only for collections supporting graduate or advanced undergraduate studies. Vorlicky (drama, New York Univ.) provides a major service by bringing together 22 interviews with Kushner, about half previously published (but several in ephemeral and nonacademic periodicals) and the others transcribed from television talk shows and symposia. The breadth of Kushner's interests and knowledge and the passion of his political and social commitments are on full display here. Reading the two collections together is particularly illuminating, as Kushner's own views at times both confirm and dampen the critical speculations of

the scholars. Both volumes are mandatory for academic American literature, theater, or gay studies collections. Public libraries serving substantial gay male populations also should consider the collection of interviews. Robert W. Melton, Univ. of Kansas Libs. Lawrence Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Very very useful as a companion piece to "Angels".

This book offers a loosely organised collection of 18 essays on Kushner's play "Angels in America". If you are looking for a coherent exploration of the underlying themes and metaphors of this epic drama, you will not find it here. The contributions each stand very much on their own and highlight the work from a random, even somewhat bewildering diversity of angles. Most of them are highly abstract and philosophical. You will come across sentences like "The ambivalences that are so deeply described in Angels in America, its conflicted relationship to various utopianisms, to the concept of America, to Marxism, Mormonism, and liberalism, function, I believe, to accommodate the play to what I see as a fundamentally conservative and paradigmatically American political - dissensus, the 'hermeneutics of laissez-faire'," or, "Epic theatre needs to construct the experience of ideological contradiction as the mode of subjectivity it projects for spectators rather than the ideological totalization implied in supporter, judgment, empathy or even detachment." There is a lot of repetition. The exposition about Walter Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', seminal in the genesis of the play, is illuminating when it occurs in the first essay, but becomes wearisome on its third or fourth repetition several essays further on. Nearly all the authors focus on the obvious key scenes in the play (e.g., the opening of Millennium, the closing of Perestroika), which are also cited repetitively, and though their different viewpoints lend extra depth to these scenes, many others remain undiscussed. I was furthermore disappointed by the strong accent on *AinA* as a gay lib and/or AIDS play, and the comparative neglect of its universal meaning and appeal (as demonstrated by the extraordinary success of the recent HBO televised version). Some contributions struck me as pointless or out of place: the interview with Robert Altman was already superseded by later development at the time the book went to press, and though the editors think it offers worthwhile visions of Kushner, Altman's most common answer to questions appears to be 'I don't know'. De Jongh's essay about *AinA* in London is more about British censorship history than Kushner's play. All in all a very mixed bag, that I'm not sure I wholeheartedly recommend.

In my opinion, "Angels in America" is the greatest American play of all time. The blend of realism,

fantasy, scenes of almost cinematic magnitude, and monologues full of stunning poetry, make this the most incredible theatrical experience ever. So it was with mixed feelings that I picked up this book. I was a little weary about spoiling the experience of the show with too much analysis. Fortunately, though, I was pleasantly surprised. This book is not just scholarly babble. These college-friendly essays actually provide some very useful analogies to the work. It helped me to better understand, and therefore appreciate, Tony Kushner's amazing epic. If you are a fan of "Angels in America", and want to gain more insight, then this is a definite buy for you.

I wasn't very keen on reading some scholar-talk when it comes to one of my favorite dramas ever. Not perhaps because of spoiling the magic, but because it's hard to write intelligent and witty not too much of the intellectual postmodern jargon, when it comes to questions on identity, race, gender etc. I was simply amazed by this book. The last part of essays (dealing with its performances) is perhaps the weakest of them all. It's like a bunch of reviews. However, the "Identity" part... kicks ass! Obligatory for fans of Kushner but also for those, who're interested in the whole complexity of drama as a genre. One of the most intelligent and coherent books analysing the problem of structure, questions on a hero of the play (and her/his identity - this one is really brilliant!), as well as problems with using and dealing with the cultural patterns, which are involved in a theater play.

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