

**TONY KUSHNER'S "GAY FANTASIA ON NATIONAL THEMES":
INITIAL IMPACT, ADAPTATIONS AND REVERBERATIONS**

by

George Ainsworth Christensen

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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DEDICATION

To Steve Kotrch, my personal Angel in America

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the text of Tony Kushner's monumental play, *Angels in America*, and identifies major themes, concepts and characters as they personally resonated with the author, a formerly married, closeted, contemporary American homosexual.

After the script of the play is analyzed in considerable detail, a line-by-line comparison to the recorded HBO-Films version of *Angels in America* is discussed with emphasis on the changes, if any, that were introduced by the adaptation from stage to film. It is shown that very little alteration was required to accommodate Kushner's original construct for the television production.

Kushner's published theatrical script is then compared, again line-by-line, to the published libretto and a video recording of the world premiere performance of *Angels in America*, an opera by Hungarian composer Péter Eötvös and his wife, librettist Mari Mezei. This adaptation requires substantial changes to, and deletions from, the theatrical script. The thesis then examines the impact of the changes and deletions made for the opera to those major themes, concepts and characters that originally attracted the author to this material when presented on the theatrical stage.

The author's conclusion is that the opera, while interesting and of considerable artistic value in its own right, is very different from the original theatrical version. The Eötvös/Mezei opera shifts primary focus onto two characters, Prior Walter and Harper Pitt, and away from their partners, Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt; the roles of Roy Cohn and Belize are substantially reduced, and the role of Hannah is marginalized. The opera does

emphasize the fantasy elements of the play, as represented by The Angel, who is given relatively more to sing than most other major characters in the opera; the play's left-leaning, anti-Reagan political content is largely eliminated, as is most of Kushner's campy, brittle, bitchy, Queer humor.

Learning to live in contemporary America as an openly gay man in the workplace, the neighborhood and, perhaps most difficult, inside my own head and heart was a lengthy, confusing and sometimes painful process. Kushner's words, especially his ideas and constructs as contained in *Angels in America*, were a powerful element in the author's education, burgeoning self-awareness and somewhat belated self-acceptance.

Chapter 1

“HOUSE LIGHTS TO HALF. STANDBY TO RAISE CURTAIN” -- Introduction

On a warm night in the early autumn of 1993 I settled comfortably into my audience seat at the Walter Kerr Theatre on West 48th Street in New York City. I had read several articles about a new play in preparation and being work-shopped by gay playwright Tony Kushner in San Francisco and subsequently in Los Angeles and London. The advance press, at least in the national gay magazine, *The Advocate*, and a local Washington, DC weekly gay newspaper, *The Washington Blade*, had been highly favorable. Thus, I had purchased my ticket to this evening's Broadway performance of Kushner's *Angels in America – A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Part One: Millennium Approaches* with very high expectations.

That performance of *Millennium Approaches* proved to be a theatrical experience the equal in intensity and personal impact to anything I had previously experienced at any Broadway, regional or community theater production. Kushner's script, the direction, the performances – individually and collectively – all seemed to be aimed directly at my personal Queer sensibilities. I wept with “the shock of recognition,” and with the joyful realization that finally, here, on a Broadway stage, for all the world to see, were realistic male homosexual characters being portrayed in a multi-dimensional, believable and essentially sympathetic context for audience identification and approval. I felt those same

positive feelings when I returned to New York City about nine months later to see Part Two of Kushner's great work, *Perestroika*.

Angels in America, of course, also presents a great deal more for audiences – gay and straight – to consider and contemplate. I will examine some of those issues and themes in the pages that follow. However, I must explain at the very outset of this paper that *Angels in America* produced in me a nearly intoxicating, highly euphoric feeling of enhanced self-esteem and a very real sense of personal validation as a gay American. Those positive feelings have not diminished over the intervening years.

About three years later, a professional theater company in Arlington, Virginia, was conducting a fundraiser that featured a silent auction. One of the items being auctioned was an autographed theater poster for the New York production of *Angels in America*. I could not resist bidding on the poster, and subsequently I increased my own offer – twice – just to ward off potential competitors in the bidding. That framed poster now hangs in my Dover, Delaware, home in a prominent family room location. (See Figure 1).¹

The original germ of what grew to become Kushner's massive "Gay Fantasia on National Themes" was generated by a 1987 commission from the Eureka Theatre Company of San Francisco, California, for a 90-minute comedy, a

¹ All eight New York cast members signed (Kathleen Chalfont, David Marshall Grant, Marcia Gay Harden, Ron Liebman, Joe Mantello, Ellen McLaughlin, Stephen Spinella and Jeffrey Wright). Four understudy autographs are also included (Susan Bruce, Beth McDonald, Matthew Sussman and Daniel Zelman).

short and humorous play with serious underlying issues. Readings, workshops and productions in San Francisco, Los Angeles and London eventually led in 1993 to the Walter Kerr Theatre. *Millennium Approaches* opened on May 4, 1993 and played for 20 previews and 367 performances. *Perestroika* opened on November 23, 1993 and played at the Walter Kerr, in repertory with *Millennium Approaches*, for 26 previews and 217 performances. Both shows closed on December 4, 1994.

From the sheer quantity of American Theatre Wing Antoinette Perry (“Tony”) Awards and Drama Desk Awards (and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama) received by the New York production of *Angels in America, Parts One and Two* it would appear that much of the American professional theater world was as impressed as I had been with Kushner’s great work.²

² The 1993 Tony Award for Best Play went to *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches*. Individual awards were received by director George C. Wolfe and actors Ron Leibman and Stephen Spinella. Also nominated that year were Robin Wagner (Scenic Design), Jules Fisher (Lighting Design) and actors Joe Mantello, Kathleen Chalfont and Marcia Gay Harden. The 1992-1993 Drama Desk Award for Best Play was given to *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches*; George C. Wolfe won for Best Director of a Play, Ron Liebman took home the Best Actor award and Stephen Spinella and Joe Mantello both won in a tie for Featured Actor in a Play. *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* also received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

The 1994 Tony Award for Best Play went to *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika*. Stephen Spinella and Jeffrey Wright were recognized as Best Lead and Featured Actors in a Play. Additional Tony Award nominees included director George C. Wolfe, lighting designer Jules Fisher and actor David Marshall Grant. The 1993-1994 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play was won by *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* and winner for Featured Actor in a Play was Jeffrey Wright. Drama Desk Award nominees that year included actors Stephen Spinella, Kathleen Chalfont, Ron Liebman and Marcia Gay Harden.

I have, to date, seen four different, complete productions of *Angels in America, Parts One and Two*. Each had distinctly individual production values and artistic interpretations. I saw the original Broadway version, Parts One and Two separated by about eight months. Then I attended a Washington, D.C. road show production in the Eisenhower Theatre of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Parts One and Two performed in repertory and seen a few weeks apart. Next, a regional theater production staged by Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, with *Millennium Approaches* presented as the last show of the 1998-99 season and *Perestroika* performed as the first production of their 1999-2000 season. Finally, I returned to New York City in February 2011 to see the first New York City revival of *Angels in America, Parts One and Two*, now re-envisioned as a smaller, more intimate chamber piece in the Peter Norton Space on West 42nd Street, Part One (matinee) and Part Two (evening) being seen on the same day.

In December 2003, the HBO cable television network began airing their film adaptation of *Angels in America*, directed by Mike Nichols with screenplay written by Tony Kushner. In the late spring of 2004 this HBO Films production began to be available in DVD format for purchase by the general public.

Finally, to my surprise, Kushner's *Angels in America* was adapted and produced as an opera that premiered November 23, 2004 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, France, with music by Hungarian composer Péter Eötvös and libretto prepared by his wife, Mari Mezei.

At this point, I could not imagine that Kushner's original script for *Angels in America* could survive adaptations for film and for the operatic stage without being radically altered in ways that would fundamentally change its message, mood and focus.

It is my purpose in this thesis to compare the 1994 published scripts for Tony Kushner's *Angels in America – a Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, both *Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Part Two: Perestroika* with the screenplay dialogue as performed in the DVD version of the HBO Films production. (It must be noted that in 1996 Kushner published a Revised Version of the *Perestroika* text. For analytical consistency, I have used the 1994 American original published version of the play).

Further, I will compare both the original theatrical script and adapted screenplay with the printed opera libretto and a DVD recording of a performance of the 2004 Paris production of the opera. Analysis of the alterations to the content, focus, tone and impact of the original story as a result of this adaptation process will constitute the bulk of the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter 2

“THE GREAT WORK BEGINS” – The Play(s)

The first question to address is whether *Angels in America – A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* by Tony Kushner is comprised of one play (in two very large parts) or as two separate and distinct plays, one the sequel to the other? For example the Pulitzer Prize and the American Theatre Wing nominating panels considered each part individually. Theatre Communications Group has published the play scripts in two separate volumes. But for my purposes, this severance of Part One from Part Two seems sometimes too violent, too much like surgically dividing conjoined twins – undoubtedly more convenient – but somehow diluting the essence and power of the original presentation. Treating the two halves of *Angels in America* as separate entities also leaves several issues hanging (as, for instance, that Angel hovering in Prior’s bedroom) and too many key questions unresolved to leave to a mere sequel for resolution. Considering *Millennium Approaches*, without examining *Perestroika*, would be an exercise like looking at all the interesting trees without understanding the concept of “forest.”

Also, the phrase “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” is part of work’s title, both parts, but constant iteration of the full title could become mind-numbing and attention-killing. So, for simplicity and ease of comprehension, at least for purposes of this paper, the usage *Angels in America* will always refer to the complete, two-part play and each part may be separately identified as

Millennium Approaches (or occasionally just “*Millennium*”) and *Perestroika*.

Theatrical Antecedents

The concept of a “Gay Play” was foreign to the Broadway theatrical world before 1968. Homosexual (or obviously effeminate) characters had appeared in American theater and film with some regularity in the 1920s and 1930s, usually as stock figures of broad comedy and derision. Early films featuring Edward Everett Horton as the side kick of the romantic (straight) male lead or Franklin Pangborn as the prissy foil who somehow advances the plot of the (straight) boy-gets-girl romantic comedies of the period are very easy to identify.

Homosexual characters/plot lines were obvious in such plays as *Tea and Sympathy* (Robert Anderson, 1953) or films like *Advise and Consent* (directed by Otto Preminger based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Allen Drury, 1962). But the first New York-produced unequivocally and thoroughly gay play to receive critical acclaim was Mart Crowley’s 1968 in-your-face depiction of contemporary homosexuality and individual homosexuals, warts and all, in *The Boys in the Band*. In 1970 *The Boys in the Band* was adapted for the screen with the original New York cast intact, in the intervening year (June 1969) the public’s attention having been directed – in some media – to the “Stonewall Riots” in lower Manhattan. Police raids and extortions of existing homosexual clubs and bars were violently resisted in a weekend of resistance and rioting at the Stonewall Inn, prominently led by drag queens (men, mostly gay, cross dressers) who revolted against the intimidation and harassment of “New York’s Finest.”

Lists of other early gay plays would include Michael Cristofer's *The 5th of July* (1977) and Lanford Wilson's *Shadow Box* (1978) where the gay sub-plots are treated respectfully and matter-of-factly.

The emergence of HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) infection led fairly quickly to the appearance of the first specifically AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) themed plays. William Hoffman's *As Is* opened off-Broadway in at the Circle Theatre in Sheridan Square on March 10, 1985, and Larry Kramer's explosive and intensely angry, anti-Reagan-administration *The Normal Heart* opened on April 21, 1985, at Joseph Papp's The Public Theatre in the East Village. Thereafter, the New York theater scene only rarely did not present at least one gay themed play to theater patrons. (See Appendix for a Chronology of Significant Gay-themed Plays 1953-2010.)

Various critics and graduate degree candidates also point out parallels between Kushner's *Angels in America* and various ideas and theatrical concepts of Lionel Abel, Bertold Brecht and Samuel Beckett. (See especially Allen J. Frantzen's *Before the Closet* and Allen J. Gorney's thesis "*Truly an Awesome Spectacle*": *Gender Performativity, The Closet, and the Alienation Effect in Angels in America*). There are connections to be made between the dictates of such theater theorists and the entity *Angels in America* that Kushner's imagination has placed before us. Abel's construct of "metatheater" is obviously present in the back of Kushner's mind in his construct of *Angels*, as are seminal concepts of Brecht and Walter Benjamin. (Cf. Art Borreca, "'Dramaturging' the Dialectic:

Brecht, Benjamin, and Declan Donnellan's Production of *Angels in America*.”

Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America. Ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger).

The length and scope of Kushner's play are virtually unprecedented and are absolutely necessary to display the multiple layers of meaning and experience he wishes to examine. The themes that Kushner lays out in *Angels in America* include Jewish and Mormon emigration (and immigration), the non-melting pot which is twentieth-century (and earlier) America, the contemporary Gay experience and the emergence of AIDS, the parallels he sees between the reactionary 1950s Eisenhower/McCarthy/Cohn political atmosphere of paranoia and the 1980s Reagan administration response to the AIDS pandemic and its existential threat to the homosexual community in America. Layered upon all this is Kushner's examination of theatrical reality as a mixture of the concrete and the fantasy world of Harper's Valium-induced hallucinations, the appearance of the Angelic Continental Principalities, and the basic, ultimate conflict and incompatibility of Angelic desires for stasis v. the irresistible human need for progress, growth and constant change. The operatic swings between fantasy and reality, past and present, history and the present, and – piquantly – between the living and the dead (e.g., the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg), show Kushner in *Angels in America* to be an artist at the peak of creative mastery.

Structure

In *Angels in America* Kushner has written a play which usually takes nearly seven hours to perform. *Millennium Approaches* is in three acts and usually lasts at least three hours and fifteen minutes. *Perestroika* is a five-act play with an Epilogue and usually lasts a little bit longer. (Kushner has suggested certain specific optional cuts in *Perestroika* when production considerations require). Kushner has given every act a subtitle. For example, Act I of *Millennium Approaches* is labeled “Bad News.”

The plays are divided as follows (using scene descriptions as written by Kushner in the printed stage directions):

Millennium Approaches, Act I – “Bad News.” October-November 1985.

- Scene 1) Sarah Ironson’s funeral;
- Scene 2) Roy Cohn’s Manhattan office;
- Scene 3) Joe and Harper Pitt’s Brooklyn apartment;
- Scene 4) Outside the funeral home;
- Scene 5) Split scene - Joe and Harper at home; Louis and Rabbi at cemetery;
- Scene 6) Men’s Room, Brooklyn Federal Court House;
- Scene 7) Mutual dream scene (Harper and Prior);
- Scene 8) Split scene - Joe and Harper at home; Prior and Louis in bed;
- Scene 9) Roy and Henry, his doctor, in Henry’s office.

Act II – “In Vitro.” December 1985-January 1986.

- Scene 1) Prior alone on the floor of his bedroom;
- Scene 2) Harper sitting at home, alone, with no lights on;
- Scene 3) Prior’s room in the hospital;
- Scene 4) Split scene – Roy and Joe in a fancy (straight) bar; Louis and a Man in Central Park;
- Scene 5) Prior and Belize in Prior’s hospital room;
- Scene 6) Martin, Roy and Joe in a fancy Manhattan restaurant;

- Scene 7) Outside the Hall of Justice, Brooklyn;
- Scene 8) Joe at payphone phoning Hannah at home in Salt Lake City;
- Scene 9) Split scene - Joe and Harper at home; Louis and Prior in Prior's hospital room;
- Scene 10) In front of Hannah's house in Salt Lake City.

Act III – “Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning.” January 1986.

- Scene 1) Prior in bed in his apartment;
- Scene 2) Split scene - Louis and Belize in a coffee shop; Prior at the outpatient clinic;
- Scene 3) Harper in a very white, cold place;
- Scene 4) An abandoned lot in the South Bronx;
- Scene 5) Joe and Roy in the study of Roy's brownstone;
- Scene 6) Prior's bedroom.

Perestroika, Act I – “Spooj.” January 1986.

- Scene 1) Hall of Deputies, the Kremlin, Moscow;
- Scene 2) Joe and Louis in Louis' new apartment in Alphabetland;
- Scene 3) In Harper's imaginary Antarctica;
- Scene 4) In the Pitt apartment in Brooklyn;
- Scene 5) Prior in bed, alone, asleep // Belize and Henry in the hospital;
- Scene 6) Roy in his hospital bed;
- Scene 7) Split scene - Joe and Louis in bed in Alphabetland; Hannah and Harper in the Pitt apartment in Brooklyn.

Act II – “The Epistle (For Sigrid Wurschmidt).”³ February “1986.

- Scene 1) Prior and Belize after the funeral of a mutual friend;
- Scene 2) The Angel and Prior in Prior's bedroom, three weeks earlier.

³ Sigrid Wurschmidt of The Eureka Theatre Company, San Francisco, died in 1990 at age 37 of breast cancer. She was known to Tony Kushner from Eureka's 1987 premiere of his *A Bright Room Called Day*. She was his inspiration for The Angel.

Act III – “Borborygmi (The Squirring Facts Exceed the Squamous Mind).”
February 1986.

- Scene 1) Roy in his hospital room;
- Scene 2) The Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitor’s Center;
- Scene 3) In the dunes at Jones Beach;
- Scene 4) Roy’s hospital room;
- Scene 5) At the Brooklyn Heights Promenade.

Act IV – “John Brown’s Body.” February 1986.

- Scene 1) Split scene - Louis on a park bench; Joe and Roy in Roy’s hospital room;
- Scene 2) Joe in his office at the Hall of Justice;
- Scene 3) At the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park;
- Scene 4) At the Mormon Visitor’s Center;
- Scene 5) At the Brooklyn Heights Promenade;
- Scene 6) Prior, Emily and Hannah in an examination room in St. Vincent’s emergency room;
- Scene 7) Harper and Joe at home, in bed;
- Scene 8) Louis in his apartment;
- Scene 9) Roy in a very serious hospital bed.

Act V – “Heaven, I’m in Heaven.” February 1986.

- Scene 1) Prior’s hospital room;
- Scene 2) The Prophet Prior Walter is in Heaven;
- Scene 3) Two AM. Roy’s hospital room;
- Scene 4) Two AM. Joe enters the empty Brooklyn apartment;
- Scene 5) Heaven: in the Council Room of the Continental Principalities;
- Scene 6) On the streets of Heaven;
- Scene 7) As Prior journeys to earth he sees Roy at a great distance;
- Scene 8) Prior descends from Heaven and slips into bed;
- Scene 9) Split scene – Louis and Prior in Prior’s hospital room; Harper and Joe in Brooklyn;
- Scene 10) Harper is in a window seat on board a jumbo jet, airborne.

Epilogue – “Bethesda.” February 1990. At the Bethesda Fountain, Central Park.

Dramatis Personae

Angels in America is a play with at least thirty distinct characters. *Angels in America* – all seven hours of it – is also a play written for exactly eight actors. And that is a large part of the attraction that the play has for actors and seasoned theater-goers. Casting an actor in multiple roles is hardly a new practice. Presumably they were doing it in the Greek odeons B.C.E., not to mention Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. But Kushner seems to take the idea just a little bit further. Every actor plays at least two roles in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, and sometimes even more. For example, the actress portraying Hannah Pitt, Joe's mother, is also cast as Rabbi Chemelwitz; Henry, Roy's doctor; Ethel Rosenberg; the World's Oldest Bolshevik; and The Angel Asiatica.

The question of "lead characters" yields to differing interpretations. Some viewers have considered that Prior Walter is the principal protagonist of both Parts One and Two – the actor playing Prior is probably onstage for a greater time than any other player – and that all other plot lines and character arcs are subordinate to Prior's. On the other hand, Kushner has written the character of Roy Cohn in such a way that any competent actor playing Roy cannot avoid stealing every scene. Solomon-like, the Tony Awards committee split the difference giving Best Lead Actor in 1993 to "Roy Cohn" (Ron Liebman) and Best Featured Actor to "Prior Walter" (Stephen Spinella) in *Millennium Approaches* and in 1994 gave Spinella his own Best Lead Actor award for "Prior" in *Perestroika*. Another view might hold the Mormon family in conflict – Joe,

Harper and Hannah – constitutes the heart and core of Kushner’s drama. My personal opinion largely sidesteps this question because I believe that *Angels in America* is truly an ensemble piece. Every actor – every character – has a vital and essential contribution to make to the play’s narrative. Remove or change any one of them, like pulling a thread in a tapestry, and the whole structure is thereby altered and damaged. Herewith, the full cast of characters (using Kushner’s own descriptions):

Millennium Approaches

Roy M. Cohn, a successful New York lawyer and unofficial power broker.
Joseph Porter Pitt, chief clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson of the Federal Court of Appeals, Second Circuit.

Harper Amaty Pitt, Joe’s wife, an agoraphobic with a mild Valium addiction.

Louis Ironson, a word processor working for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals.

Prior Walter, Louis’ boyfriend, occasionally works as a club designer or caterer, otherwise lives very modestly but with great style off a small trust fund.

Hannah Porter Pitt, Joe’s mother, currently residing in Salt Lake City, living off her deceased husband’s army pension.

Belize, a former drag queen and former lover of Prior’s. A registered nurse. His name was originally Norman Arriaga; Belize is a drag name that stuck.

The Angel, four divine emanations, Fluor, Phosphor, Lumen and Candle; manifest in One: The Continental Principality of America. She has magnificent steel-gray wings.

Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz, an orthodox Jewish rabbi, played by the actor playing Hannah.

Mr. Lies, Harper’s imaginary friend, a travel agent, who in style of dress and speech suggests a jazz musician; he always wears a large lapel badge emblazoned “IOTA” (The International Order of Travel Agents). He is played by the actor playing Belize.

The Man in the Park, played by the actor playing Prior.

The Voice, the voice of The Angel.

Henry, Roy’s doctor, played by the actor playing Hannah.

Emily, a nurse, played by the actor playing The Angel.

Martin Heller, a Reagan Administration Justice Department flackman,
played by the actor playing Harper.

Sister Ella Chapter, a Salt Lake City real-estate saleswoman, played by the
actor playing The Angel

Prior I, the ghost of a dead Prior Walter from the 13th century, played by
the actor playing Joe. He is a blunt, gloomy medieval farmer with
a guttural Yorkshire accent.

Prior 2, the ghost of a dead Prior Walter from the 17th century, played by
the actor playing Roy. He is a Londoner, sophisticated, with a
High British accent.

The Eskimo, played by the actor playing Joe.

The Woman in the South Bronx, played by the actor playing The Angel.

Ethel Rosenberg, played by the actor playing Hannah.

Perestroika

Recurring characters from *Millennium Approches*:

The Angel, Prior Walter, Louis Ironson, Joe Pitt, Harper Pitt, Hannah Pitt,
Belize, Roy Cohn, Mr. Lies, Henry, Ethel Rosenberg, Emily, and Rabbi
Isidor Chemelwitz.

New characters

Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the World's Oldest Bolshevik,
played by the actress playing Hannah.

Mannequins in the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitors' Center:

- The Mormon Father, played by the actor playing Joe.
- Caleb, an offstage voice; the voice of the actor playing Belize.
- Orrin, an offstage voice; the voice of the actress playing the Angel.
- The Mormon Mother, played by the actress playing the Angel.

The Continental Principalities, inconceivably powerful Celestial
Apparatchik/Bureaucrat-Angels of whom the Angel of America is
a peer:

- The Angel Europa, played by the actor playing Joe.
- The Angel Africanii, played by the actress playing Harper.
- The Angel Oceania, played by the actor playing Belize.
- The Angel Asiatica, played by the actress playing Hannah.
- The Angel Australia, played by the actor playing Louis.
- The Angel Antarctica, played by the actor playing Roy.

Sarah Ironson, Louis' dead grandma, who was interred by Rabbi
Chemelwitz in Part One, Act One. She is played by the
actor playing Louis.

Taped Voice: The voice that introduces Prelapsarianov in Act One, Scene 1 and the Council of Principalities in Act Five, Scene 5, and that speaks the welcome and narrative introduction in the diorama, should be that of the actress playing the Angel. These taped intros should sound alike: not parodic but beautiful and serious, the way the unseen Angel sounds in *Millennium*.

Barebones plot summary: *Millennium Approaches*

In order to examine and analyze the faithfulness of any adaptation of some work, one must first have a clear understanding and appreciation for the original.

Toward that end we should briefly examine the skeleton of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

Rabbi Chemelwitz eulogizes Sarah Ironson, Louis' grandmother, an immigrant to America, "the melting pot where nothing melted." (M-10)⁴

Prior Walter and Louis Ironson have been boyfriends/lovers for about four years. Prior reveals to Louis that he is infected (October 1985) with what will come to be called HIV. Prior has found lesions on his body that will soon confirm his AIDS diagnosis. Louis promises that he will never leave Prior.

Joe and Harper Pitt, Mormons in Manhattan, are a married couple with secrets. Harper is agoraphobic and is addicted to Valium; Joe is a Republican lawyer and a closeted homosexual who has not yet admitted his true sexual orientation to anyone, especially himself.

⁴ Quotations from *Angels in America* will be cited by page number in parentheses, using the Theatre Communications Group 1994 editions; "M" or "P" will indicate either *Millennium Approaches* or *Perestroika*, as appropriate, when necessary for clarity.

Roy Cohn – the real-life lackey of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1950s – is now a Manhattan attorney being threatened with disbarment. Roy wants to mentor a young, loyal, discreet, Republican lawyer and place him in a mid-level position in the Department of Justice in Washington, DC to serve as Roy’s eyes and ears from within the Federal government. Roy cultivates Joe Pitt and tries to recruit him for a Washington appointment, promising preferment and patriotic satisfaction. Roy also happens to be HIV+ and will soon be diagnosed with full blown AIDS.

Joe meets Louis and they cautiously begin to explore an emotional and physical relationship. Joe finally “comes out” as a gay man to himself and, by telephone from Central Park in the middle of the night, to his Mormon mother, Hannah Pitt. Hannah immediately sells her home in Utah and travels to New York to help Joe and Harper, her son and daughter-in-law.

“Belize,” originally named Norman Arriaga, is a Registered Nurse. He is an old friend and an ex-lover of Prior. At the hospital he is assigned to provide nursing care for Roy Cohn.

Ethel Rosenberg, a convicted atomic spy, was executed on June 19, 1953 along with her husband, Julius, primarily because of the machinations of Roy Cohn according to Kushner. She comes to visit the dying Roy, patiently waiting for her revenge at his eventual and inevitable disbarment and lonely death. Is Ethel a ghost? An hallucination? It does not matter. Ethel reinforces a direct connection Kushner wishes us to make between the reactionary excesses of the

McCarthy/Cohn era of the mid-1950s America and an atmosphere of mistrust and disbelief in the Reagan administration as experienced by the homosexual community in the mid-1980s. Both Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg were, of course, historical persons, and the real Roy Cohn did die August 2, 1986 of AIDS (in Bethesda, Maryland), but Kushner does not expect the *Angels in America* audience to accept his “real” characters’ words and actions literally.

In the final scene of *Millennium Approaches*, Prior’s bedroom ceiling collapses and The Angel appears, crying “Greetings, Prophet; The Great Work Begins: The Messenger has arrived.” (M-119)

Barebones plot summary: *Perestroika*

Louis (Prior’s ex) and Joe (Harper’s soon to be ex) are vigorously checking out the parameters of their relationship. Louis does not yet know that Joe has a connection to the notorious Roy Cohn. Harper descends further into delusion and alienation. Roy gets sicker and, acting on information provided by Belize, he illegally obtains a large supply of AZT, an experimental antiretroviral drug for treating HIV infection.

Prior tells Belize about the Angel’s visit (final scene of *Millennium Approaches*) and the audience learns in flashback the purpose of the visit, the selection by the Angels of Prior as Prophet, and the intense sexual energy generated within Prior’s sick body by the Angel’s proximity. Belize is skeptical and believes Prior is probably becoming delusional because of his disease.

Hannah is now working at the Manhattan Mormon Visitor’s Center where

daughter-in-law Harper talks to the dummies in The Diorama Room. Joe comes there to see Hannah; Prior follows Joe and then Prior talks to Hannah. A feverish Prior collapses and Hannah takes Prior to the hospital.

Louis discovers that Joe is Roy Cohn's "butt boy." (P-92). After being taunted, insulted and savagely belittled by Louis, Joe completely loses control and he physically beats Louis viciously.

Roy finally dies. Belize phones Louis and instructs him to come to the hospital immediately to say Kaddish for Roy. Ethel Rosenberg helps Louis ("... an intensely secular Jew, I didn't even Bar Mitzvah" (P-125)) to remember the words for Kaddish. Belize then gives Louis, his "drug mule," all of Roy's unused AZT to smuggle out of the hospital.

The Angel appears in Prior's hospital room. Hannah tells Prior that he must wrestle with the Angel and demand a blessing. Prior does so, bests the Angel, and is allowed to enter heaven to confront the angelic Council of the Continental Principalities about his assignment as their Prophet. After Prior leaves the hospital room by climbing up to heaven on a flaming ladder, Hannah is embraced by the Angel, with sexually intense results for them both.

Prior has his interview with the entire Council and he refuses appointment as their Prophet. He also gives them some quasi-legal advice regarding a potential law suit against God. Back on earth, Louis asks to "come back" as Prior's boyfriend. Prior says, "No." Joe asks Harper for another chance at making their marriage work. Harper says, "Hell, No!"

In an epilogue, Louis, Hannah, Belize and Prior meet at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. Prior, appropriately, has the last word of the play, “The Great Work Begins.”

What the Angels Wanted

The Angel explains to Prior that “Migration, Science and Forward Motion ... shakes up heaven ... Shaking HIM (God)” (P-42). God has become bored with his angels and bewitched by humanity and on April 18, 1906 (the date of the great San Francisco earthquake and fire), He left ... and did not return. The Council has determined that all this human progress and movement must cease. “You have driven Him away! You must stop moving!” (P-44). If human stasis could be achieved, perhaps God would relent and return to His place in heaven, restoring order and unity to creation. The angels cannot do this in God’s absence; they are exceptionally powerful, but lack imagination and speculative intelligence. Now, they expect Prior, as their anointed prophet, to spread the message that human change, progress and movement must stop.

Prior explains to the Council that migration, intermingling, and change are part of the essence of what it means to be alive. It is not possible that we could ever stop this forward motion even if humanity so desired. Prior returns the implements of prophethood to the Council, resigns his appointment, and demands their blessing. His final advice to the dispirited, leaderless angels is:

PRIOR: He isn’t coming back. And even if he did ... If He ever did come back, if He ever *dared* to show His face, or His Glyph or whatever in the Garden again ... if after all this

destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see ... how much suffering His abandonment had created, if He did come back you should *sue* the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He! (P-130).

Metatheatre

Angels in America is remarkable from several different angles of analysis. The epic scale of this story in breadth, scope and duration has not been matched in New York since. Kushner uses several concepts associated with Lionel Abel and his construct of "metatheatre," a philosophical approach to script writing and theater production that, among other things, seeks to remind the audience that the performance being watched is neither reality nor even a reflection of reality. Instead, Abel insists that dramatic forms are related to, and take their life from, values which are important outside of drama.⁵ Abel would endorse bending "reality" in performance by defying the Aristotelian unities of action, time and place; by introducing real or anachronistic events or characters, and by using any means available to stimulate and direct audience emotion or thought toward some value, condition or situation outside the theatre.

Bertold Brecht and Samuel Beckett are modern playwrights cited favorably by Abel as exemplars of metatheatrical theory. Brecht's *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* does illustrate that drama can function on several levels simultaneously. Arturo Ui, at first meeting, may seem like a cheap parody of a

⁵ Abel, Lionel, *Metatheatre, A New View of Dramatic Form*, pg viii.

1920s Chicago gangster, *a la* Al Capone. Add some Huey Long elements of paranoia, ego-mania and delusions of grandeur and, *viola!*, it becomes crystal clear that Brecht is actually trying to educate the audience about between-the-World-Wars Germany and the rise of Adolph Hitler.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a surreal masterwork. *Godot's* meaning, or lack thereof, has been and will continue to be debated heatedly. But the argument is not about the lines spoken or of the plot, such as it is; the argument is usually about Beckett's attitude concerning the ultimate significance of faith, even the very existence of God. That is a mighty burden to place on the shoulders of two vagabonds, Vladimir and Estragon, resting beside a barren tree in the middle of nowhere, but if that was Samuel Beckett's intention in *Waiting for Godot* then he succeeded brilliantly.

The Brecht and Beckett influences on Kushner have been examined elsewhere,⁶ but the obvious presence of some of their metatheatrical techniques gives any production of *Angels in America* a certain frisson that should be accounted for in any successful adaptation.

Both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* begin with prologue-like opening scenes in which the fourth wall is broken. In *Millennium*, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz is delivering a eulogy for Louis' grandmother, Sarah Ironson, directly to the audience, thereby making us a part of the cast: the funeral

⁶ See Fisher *The Theater of Tony Kushner* and Geis & Kruger, eds., *Approaching the Millennium*.

attendees. We are there, and we are watching ourselves (and the Rabbi) from some other place. *Perestroika* begins exactly the same way, with the audience being addressed by The World's Oldest Bolshevik. We (the audience) are simultaneously there in the theater and also some place other. A fine example of Kushner's thinking on this metatheatre sensitivity is contained in "A Note About Staging" printed on page 8 of the text of *Perestroika*:

"The moments of magic – all of them – are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion – which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing."

Kushner's Use of Humor, Strong Language and Nudity

The script of *Angels in America* is loaded with one liners, deliberately funny situations and plenty of contemporary urban, gay, gender-bending humor. Not every one in Kushner's audience will necessarily understand every campy expression uttered during the course of the play, but few will miss multiple layers of meaning in the hilarious response of Prior to the actual arrival of The Angel in his bedroom.

PRIOR: (An awestruck whisper): God Almighty ... *Very* Stephen Spielberg. (M-118)

Or consider this exchange in Act I, Scene 7 of *Millennium Approaches*, the mutual dream scene between Prior and Harper.

HARPER: Valium. I take Valium. Lots of Valium.

PRIOR: And you're dancing as fast as you can.

HARPER: I'm not *addicted*. I don't believe in addiction, and I never ...
well, I *never* drink. And I *never* take drugs.

PRIOR: Well, smell *you*, Nancy Drew.

HARPER: Except Valium.

PRIOR: Except Valium; in wee fistfuls.

HARPER: It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual.

HARPER: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR: In my church we don't believe in Mormons. (M-32)

Like the widespread use of urban, gay humor in this script, Kushner also liberally deploys what may seem to be excessively coarse language. While I was not fully prepared for the sheer quantity of profanity and expletives that poured from the mouths of the male characters on the stage of the Walter Kerr Theatre – our theatre back in the provinces seems so much tamer to me now – my ear quickly became attuned. I confess that now Kushner's dialogue sounds very natural to my ear, not unlike conversations heard at many male-only gatherings, and even the spectacularly foul-mouthed Roy Cohn is not too unlike certain high-ranking military types I have known. To my male, middle-class ear the language used in *Angels in America* seems authentic and appropriate to the characters and situations being depicted.

Also, the use of brief moments of full-frontal-male nudity – once each in

the 1993/94 Broadway productions of *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* - is an effective theatrical device, albeit fairly rare in my own theatrical experience.⁷ The naked moment in Act III, Scene 2 of *Millennium Approaches* occurs when Prior, at the hospital, is being examined by the nurse, Emily. During the course of the examination Prior removes his shirt, then trousers and is completely exposed for several seconds before donning an hospital gown. The main thing the audience will focus on here is Prior's generally emaciated state and the presence of several Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) lesions on his body.

In the Jones Beach scene (Act III, Scene 3) of *Perestroika*, Louis is trying to explain his need to see Prior again to a stricken Joe Pitt who thinks Louis is breaking up with him. Joe offers to "give up" anything and everything in order to appease Louis. Symbolizing Joe's Mormon faith are the Temple garments he wears, underclothing which is a protection and symbol of the chastity his church demands of him. Joe begins to remove all his clothing.

JOE: You don't want to see me anymore. Louis. Anything.
Whatever you want. I can give up anything. My skin.

(... Louis, when he realizes what Joe is doing, tries to stop him).

LOUIS: What are you doing, someone will see us, it's not a nude beach, it's freezing!

JOE: I'm flayed. No past now. I could give up anything. Maybe ... in what we've been doing, maybe I'm even infected.

⁷ In some productions a fully naked (or panties only) female nude scene is staged in *Perestroika*, Act IV, Scene 7 when Harper demands of Joe Pitt, "Look at me ... What do you see?" Joe replies, "Nothing, ..." (P-107)

LOUIS: No, you're ...

JOE: I don't want to be. I want to live now. And I can be anything I need to be. And I want to be with you." (P-74)

Joe stands bravely, down stage center, completely naked, offering to Louis all that he can think of, in what came across to me as a profoundly humbling, almost romantic and ultimately unsuccessful act of total submission. In the original 1993/94 Broadway production actor David Marshall Grant understatedly portrayed Joe's complete vulnerability and utter surrender at this point, no more doubt and questioning, no more confusion. I found nothing erotic or lewd about this scene, merely a profound declaration and depiction of Joe's humanity and his emotional pain and need. At least that's how I was affected by the staging of this scene. In the Kennedy Center and regional theater productions I have seen, the nude scenes were cut, minimized or merely suggested, and thereby the dramatic impact of these moments was substantially diminished.

One element of Kushner's examination of gay themes in *Angels in America* that has always strongly attracted me is his clear depiction of five major homosexual characters, each different and distinct from the others. While sometimes acknowledging stereotype, each of these men relates to others, to the outside world and to his own homosexuality in divergent and psychologically valid, idiosyncratic ways. These are real men, created by Kushner in believable, three-dimensional characterizations. Each is a complete individual with strengths, weaknesses, blind spots and moments of private heroism and self

sacrifice (even, perhaps, Roy Cohn).

No one is further out of the closet than Belize, a flaming, swishy queer who is out, proud, and could not care less what anyone thinks. For all his flair and flamboyance, Belize is solidly grounded and self-aware. As an African-American gay man, he is strongly pessimistic about contemporary trends in American culture and of the liberal concept of “progress.” Belize deeply cares about and is fiercely loyal to Prior, his former lover.

And no one is more in denial than Roy Cohn:

ROY: I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys.

HENRY: OK, Roy.

ROY: And what is my diagnosis, Henry?

HENRY: You have AIDS, Roy.

ROY: No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer. (M-46).

Louis is a largely ineffectual pseudo-intellectual who has an opinion on any and every subject under the sun. He also has enough self-awareness and hyper-liberal “Jewish” guilt to fuel several more plays. He has not disclosed his homosexuality to most of his immediate family.

Prior is surprisingly well adjusted, considering that everything in his world is rapidly falling apart. He is closer to Belize than to Louis in terms of self-acceptance as a gay man. Prior is an autonomous, self-determined individual. He is proud, he is afraid. He is a little bit self-centered and melodramatic, but his droll sense of humor in the absurd, crazy world in which he finds himself is ultimately very brave and redemptive.

Joe Pitt is the quintessential straight-acting, queer-desiring twentieth-century American gay man. Joe is just like scores of men I know who struggled for years to live in the heterosexual world. They pass for straight more or less successfully, but live always under a shadow of fear, doubt, anguish and internalized homophobia that assures them they are living a lie. I know Joe Pitt intimately. For about twenty-five years, I was Joe Pitt.

Chapter 3

“FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA” – The Film

When the HBO Mini-Series production of *Angels in America* begins, we are flying through huge billowy cumulus clouds, accompanied by a Grammy Award-winning score composed by Thomas Newman. The clouds eventually part to reveal California’s Golden Gate Bridge with the hills of Marin County in the background. As the film’s opening credits begin to appear, the clouds close and obscure our bird’s eye view (or should I say “Angel’s eye” view) for a few moments and then part again to show us rapidly approaching Salt Lake City’s Temple Square, the Mormon Tabernacle immediately before us and the great Temple just beyond. The clouds close in but soon part again to disclose the magnificent Gateway Arch perched on the banks of the Mississippi River at St. Louis, Missouri. The next landmark, seen at fairly low altitude as the camera skims above Lake Michigan, is the great Chicago skyline, Sears Tower and all. The clouds close over us once again only to part, finally, over lower Manhattan. The camera swiftly flies toward Central Park and soon focuses on the Bethesda Fountain near the southern boundary of the park. The long shot zooms in on the massive bronze figure of The Angel of The Waters, ultimately giving us an extreme close-up of the statue’s head which, at the last moment before a fade-to-black, unexpectedly moves and dramatically looks directly into the camera.

The opening-credits sequence, with great economy and compression,

suggests to the audience that this film will deal with “national” themes (Marin to Manhattan); will examine the essence of the immigrant experience, and the centrality of New York City to the Jewish and homosexual themes about to be exposed. The opening sequence further suggests that the film may address significant questions for the gay community specifically (San Francisco, a principal North American gay Mecca since the 1940s); examine issues of religion (Salt Lake City) and angels (Bethesda Fountain); and generally resonate with American concepts of the frontier, Manifest Destiny and Westward migration (Gateway Arch).

The thoroughly cinematic opening sequence of the HBO Films Mini-Series adaptation is missing one significant thing, however. The full title of the play is always presented as *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The subtitle “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” has been eliminated from the film. It is not included on the DVD package, nor mentioned in the marketing advertisements. In terms of DVD content, we still have a very Gay story; in form and style, we still have a free-wheeling Brechtian fantasia of metatheatre; and in scope and treatment we are still directly concerned with national thematic questions and material. Was the omission made simply to shorten the title; to eliminate possible confusion in the minds of the mass TV and DVD audience? Was it a marketing decision, eliminating the word “Gay” from the title to avoid turning away, or “turning off” some potential viewers? In terms of content and author’s point of view, is anything actually gained by de-labeling

the material in this way? For that matter, is anything substantive lost?

Probably the first major decision by the HBO Films production staff was to retain Tony Kushner to write and oversee the screenplay. As will be shown below, the final shooting script so closely adheres to Kushner's original theatrical script as to be its clone. In terms of fidelity to the original source, the Mini-Series *Angels in America*, especially *Millennium Approaches*, is astonishingly unchanged in dialogue and stage direction. This suggests to me that *Millennium*, in Kushner's mind, was a finished and polished work; it will appear that he probably thought *Perestroika* was much less so.

A second major decision was the replacement of director Robert Altman, who had been originally selected to direct this film adaptation, with Mike Nichols, the highly esteemed and successful theater and film director. Now I happen to like most of Robert Altman's films. *The Wedding* (1978) and *Gosford Park* (2001) are true ensemble masterworks; *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) is a constant delight of clever manipulation of the *mise-en-scene*. Altman's *Nashville* (1975), in my opinion, is a true masterpiece that I place on a near par with *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*. But I believe his helming of an *Angels in America* adaptation would have produced a film much more focused on the forest, with less attention being given to Kushner's individual trees than in the version Mike Nichols ultimately gave us.

Nichols apparently also sensed the value and necessity of keeping many of the theatrical conventions which Kushner had exploited so clearly and cleverly on

the Broadway stage. Most importantly among those, I believe, was the decision to retain Kushner's *Angels* device of casting the eight principal actors in multiple roles.

Nichols, and the HBO staff, assembled a most impressive cast for the film. Multi-Academy Award-winning actress Meryl Streep agreed to play Hannah Pitt (with the associated roles of Ethel Rosenberg and Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz). Emma Thompson was signed to play nurse Emily, the nameless woman in the South Bronx, and The Angel. Mary-Louise Parker was cast as Harper. Jeffrey Wright reprised his Tony Award-winning role as Belize. Somewhat less well known (in 2003) actors Patrick Wilson (as Joe Pitt), Justin Kirk (as Prior Walter) and Benjamin Shenkman (as Louis Ironson) filled out the cast roster. Probably the most inspired casting choice of all was the selection of Al Pacino to portray Roy Cohn.

Mike Nichols (and screenwriter Tony Kushner, presumably) did not follow the theatrical casting template completely, however. The character of Roy Cohn's doctor, Henry, in the play was assigned to the actress playing Hannah. In the HBO Film, Henry is played by the distinguished actor James Cromwell. The Mormon mother in the Visitor's Center Diorama is a role assigned in the play to the actress playing the Angel; in the HBO Film this role is played by Robin Weigert. Finally, Attorney Martin Heller, an ally of Roy Cohn, is portrayed on stage by the actress playing Harper but in the film Heller is portrayed by Brian Markinson.

Near the end of *Millennium Approaches* Prior is visited by two male ghosts, both of whom are/were his ancestors, both also named Prior Walter; in Kushner's playful imagination these characters are described as "prior" Prior Walters. On stage, these ghosts are portrayed by the actors playing Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn. In the film adaptation we are given, instead, delightful cameo appearances by English actors Simon Callow and Michael Gambon.

The casting decisions are difficult to fault. However, when the screen is filled by film personalities with the incandescence and wattage of Pacino, Streep, Thompson and Wright – all of whom are performing at the top of their form – then the balance vis-à-vis the rest of the cast could be thrown askew. That this does not occur in the film is a tribute to the discipline and control exercised by director Nichols and to the skill and talent of the remaining actors Justin Kirk, Ben Shenkman, Patrick Wilson and Mary-Louise Parker (whose studied underplaying of Harper holds much of the film's narrative together).

The HBO Film adaptation of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was nominated for twenty-one Emmy Awards and won eleven, breaking the record previously held by *Roots*. In addition to Outstanding Miniseries, the film won (in the category Miniseries, Movie or a Dramatic Special) Outstanding Directing (Nichols), Writing (Kushner), Outstanding Lead Actor (Pacino), Lead Actress (Streep), Supporting Actor (Wright), Supporting Actress (Parker), Casting, Art Direction, Makeup, Single Camera Sound Mixing. Also nominated were Thompson as Lead Actress and Supporting Actors Wilson, Shenkman and Kirk.

The Golden Globe Awards were presented to *Angels in America* for Best Miniseries or TV Movie, Best Actor (Pacino), Best Actress (Streep), Best Supporting Actor (Wright) and Supporting Actress (Parker). Finally, the Screen Actors Guild recognized winners Pacino and Streep and nominees Kirk, Wright, Parker and Thompson for their performances in the HBO Film.

Composer Thomas Newman won a Grammy Award for his *Angels in America* Musical Score.

Structure

The HBO Mini-Series *Angels in America* was first broadcast on December 7, 2003 in two three-hour segments. Part One (162 minutes) covers *Millennium Approaches* and Part Two (about 176 minutes) contains the material from *Perestroika*. On stage *Millennium Approaches* usually runs about three hours and fifteen minutes. Running time on stage for *Perestroika* is about three hours and forty five minutes. Screenplay author Kushner was required to do some cutting of playwright Kushner's original script.

The first disc in the two-disc DVD set is divided into three Chapters, titled "Bad News" (59 minutes), "In Vitro" (48 minutes) and "The Messenger" (52 minutes). In the play, Act III of *Millennium Approaches* was titled, "Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning." The new title, "The Messenger," for Chapter 3 seems to work just fine. These Chapters are very manageable segments which HBO later chose to break into individual one-hour segments (with filler) for separate, independent broadcast.

The five-act stage version of *Perestroika* is broken down into three suitable-for- individual-broadcast segments labeled Chapters 4, “Stop Moving!” (51 minutes); Chapter 5, “Beyond Nelly” (57 minutes); and Chapter 6, “Heaven, I’m in Heaven” (59 minutes)

Script v. Screenplay – *Millennium Approaches*

Millennium Approaches, Chapter 1 in the film adaptation, exactly corresponds, in content, to Act I of the play. The film begins as Rabbi Chemelwitz (Meryl Streep) delivers a eulogy for Sarah Ironson, grandmother of Louis Ironson. The original text is trimmed to about 85% of its theatrical length. Most of the excised script is not critical in terms of exposition, but absent in the film is the Rabbi’s referral to America as “the melting pot where nothing melted” and the last line of his monologue, “So ... She was the last of the Mohicans, this one (Sarah) was ... Pretty soon ... all the old will be dead.”

Act I, Scene 2, introducing Roy Cohn (Al Pacino) and Joe Pitt (Patrick Wilson), has been trimmed by almost two pages out of five. The deletion does not substantively change the expository content, but does greatly compress the audience reaction to the characterization of Roy Cohn as a conniving son-of-a-bitch. Joe’s increasing discomfort in being exposed to Roy’s toxic, evil manipulations is made more abrupt. Thus, the deletions in this scene do soften Roy’s image slightly, but what remains is still so immoral, illegal and shocking that the dramatic point is still clear and powerful.

Scene 3, between Harper Pitt (Mary-Louise Parker) and Mr. Lies (Jeffrey

Wright) was cut by about 50%. Mr. Lies is Harper's Valium-induced, hallucinatory Travel Agent and the reduced scene still works, even though we have lost some of Harper's lines about the erosion of the ozone layer and the manner in which that layer had been previously maintained: "It's kind of a Gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world: guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself." This deleted poetic image has a direct relevance to Harper's final speech in *Perestroika*.

Act I, Scene 4, introduces Louis Ironson (Ben Shenkman) and Prior Walter (Justin Kirk). In this pivotal scene, where Prior first discloses his HIV Positive status to his lover, Louis, not one word of the original text was eliminated.

Act I, Scene 5, is a split scene in the play showing Joe and Harper Pitt at home in Brooklyn and, simultaneously, Louis and the Rabbi outside the Jewish cemetery. Joe and Harper's dialogue survives intact in the film. Louis has lost six lines of rambling, neurotic, self-justification. He still comes across as a self-aware, pseudo-intellectual, rather pathetic and frightened man.

Act I, Scene 6, of *Millennium Approaches* almost survives intact. In the film, this well-acted first meeting between Louis and Joe Pitt in a men's room at the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals has lost only one brief exchange between the two men that was in the theater script. Joe enters and finds Louis crying and asks, "What's wrong?" Louis campily responds, "Run in my nylons." A baffled

Joe replies, “Sorry ... ?” The “nylons” remark and Joe’s response were either excised by Kushner in writing the adaptation screenplay and/or were left on the cutting room floor by the film editor/director. Everything else in the theatrical script, including several campier remarks by Louis, did transfer to the screen without alteration.

The mutual dream scene, Act I, Scene 7, follows and is filmed with imagination and flair. The lines are essentially unchanged in the film adaptation. I can detect only one word (“Home”) deleted (from Harper’s last speech) and one word (“quickly”) changed (to “strangely”) from the play’s lines written for Prior. Both alterations could be a mere slip of the tongue. Neither change has any effect on the dramatic or expressive content of the scene. This fantasy sequence works beautifully because the audience has become invested in the story and has begun to care about both Prior and Harper, presented by Kushner as two deeply wounded souls in the Age of Reagan. The acting, writing and direction in this scene are particularly effective.

A major difference in the film adaptation, as distinct from the staged original, is the insertion of street scenes – background shots with automobiles and extras wandering around New York City – and the close-ups and panning shots and the sense of “movement” which in film is provided by the cameraman, editor and director. All the filmmaker’s tricks are employed to very great effect and give the film a certain foundation of believability and realism. This however is contrary to the theatrical experience of *Angels in America* where believability and

realism are not highly valued at all. Playwright Kushner's use of metatheater principles in his play pulls the audience out of the story and frequently reminds them that verisimilitude to "reality" is not what his play intends to convey. In the film adaptation of *Angels in America* the story moves in and out of alternate realities fairly successfully, but never with the seeming ease of the staged version of the tale. In this regard, certain conventions of contemporary theater seem more flexible and perhaps invite greater use of the audience's imagination.

On stage we have allegory and "magic" and intellectual challenge. It is the nature of the medium that cinema must try to achieve those goals with an entirely different approach. The audience can only passively look at one thing, the silver screen. It's up to the technical wizards to keep our attention and imagination engaged and to the actors and screenwriter to keep us identified with and caring about the characters being portrayed.

Act I, Scene 8, is a split scene between Joe and Harper at home and Prior and Louis in bed. The only changes in the film adaptation are five lines cut from Louis' extensive pseudo-philosophical ramblings (and Prior's response) and, later, Prior's extensive end-of-scene narration about his ship's-captain ancestor whose ship went down with the subsequent deaths of more than sixty immigrants who had survived the shipwreck only to be drowned by crew members fearful of floundering in a leaky life boat. The deletion of Prior's nautical yarn is unfortunate. The implacable nature of fate and the seemingly random selection of gay individuals to fall to HIV infection are both important sub-themes that

Kushner will return to in the course of his play. And Kushner's return to the theme of immigration to America and "the melting pot where nothing melts" would have reinforced that essential meme.

The final scene of Chapter 1 is between Roy Cohn and his doctor, Henry (James Cromwell). The theatrical script and the screenplay dialogue are identical.

The first two scenes of *Millennium Approaches, Act II*, make it into the screenplay with no change. Act II, Scene 3, in the play is abbreviated by cutting the end of the exchange between Louis and Prior's nurse, Emily (Emma Thompson). Lost to the screenplay are Louis' talks of the devotion of Mathilde, wife of William the Conqueror, who stayed home and stitched the Bayeux Tapestry. Louis contrasts this to his own feelings of a lack of sufficient devotion on his part to Prior. In near despair and self-loathing, Louis expresses his need for night air and a walk in the park. This neatly sets up the scene in The Rambles in Central Park. The excisions from Scene 3 makes Louis' motivation in the next scene less clear and less clean, but probably does not create a major obstacle to the film audience's understanding.

Act II, Scene 4, is a split scene showing two failed seductions. Roy and Joe are meeting in a fancy restaurant and Roy is trying to beguile and bedazzle Joe with tales of intrigue and power and influence if/when Joe goes to work in Washington, D.C. on Roy's behalf. At the same time, Louis meets a strange man (Jason Kirk) in the Rambles, a heavily trafficked gay-cruising area in Central Park. Both attempts at seduction ultimately fail.

The exchange between Louis and the Man in the Park strikes me as particularly tragi-comic. Louis tells the man that he wants to be punished, that he (Louis) has been very bad, very bad. “I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed.” Later, the Man says, “I think it broke. The rubber.” Louis’ response to this is, “Keep going. Infect me. I don’t care. I don’t care.” This remains, for me, a very shocking and chilling moment. Yet, slightly earlier in the same exchange, Louis asks this macho “Real Man,” “Can we go to your place?” His reply is, “I live with my parents.” As delivered by two talented actors, this exchange is a guaranteed laugh line.

Roy’s lines are trimmed slightly in this scene. Among the lost lines are, “The father-son relationship is central to life. Women are for birth, beginning, but the father is continuance. The son offers the father his life as a vessel for carrying forth his father’s dream,” and, later, “Don’t be afraid; people are so afraid; don’t be afraid to live in the raw wind, naked, alone ...” The lines cut from the play would have added interesting layers to Roy’s character.

The fumbling negotiations between Louis and the Man in the Park regarding condom use are also removed in the screenplay. I think this is very unfortunate. Even today, but especially in the mid-1980s, the “Safe Sex” message was beginning to be heard loudly, everywhere and often. “No penetration without protection!” I think Louis’ political correctness regarding 1985 condom use as expressed on the stage circa 1993 remains equally valid for the 2003 Mini-Series. The missing lines also help further define Louis’ obsessive, sometimes neurotic

behavior. There is an added layer of dramatic Brechtian irony if the audience recognizes that the actor playing The Man in the Park also portrays Prior.

Act II, Scene 5. A beautifully written scene between a very ill Prior and his nurse and friend, Belize. The banter between these former lovers is funny, very affectionate and sharply observed. The following exchange, in the script but deleted from the screenplay, is an excellent example of Kushner's very acute ear for dialogue.

PRIOR: (Speaking to Belize of Louis) " ... I loved his anguish. Watching him stick his head up his asshole and eat his guts out over some relatively minor moral conundrum – it was the best show in town. But Mother warned me: if they get overwhelmed by the little things ...

BELIZE: They'll be belly-up bustville when something big comes along.

PRIOR: Mother warned me.

BELIZE: And they do come along.

PRIOR: But I didn't listen.

BELIZE: No. (Doing Hepburn) Men are beasts.

PRIOR: (Also Hepburn) The absolute lowest. (M-60)

In this scene, Prior's lines are shortened by a mere fourteen words. After Belize leaves the room, Prior has a short conversation with the unseen Angel. Twenty-seven words have been removed from their exchange. These minor cuts do not significantly impact the expressive content of the original script.

Act II, Scene 6. Attorney Martin Heller and Roy Cohn meet with Joe Pitt

in a fancy restaurant. Heller's lines are trimmed (four lines removed) and Roy's speech is shortened by six lines. No major loss here, but Roy's image is somewhat softened by the removal of some of his abusive remarks directed at Heller.

Act II, Scene 7, shows Louis and Joe eating hot dogs. About fourteen lines are trimmed or deleted, none representing significant loss, until the end of the scene. However, Louis' last speech is truncated and the following lines are lost in the film:

LOUIS: (Pointing to the Brooklyn Federal Court House) Maybe the court won't convene. Ever again. Maybe we are free. To do whatever. Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan's children. You're scared. So am I. Everybody is in the land of the free. God help us all. (M-74)

Act II, Scene 8, the telephone conversation between Joe in Central Park and his mother, Hannah, in Salt Lake City transfers to the screen with only two minor words in Joe's lines changed, both possibly mere slips of the tongue.

Act II, Scene 9, is a highly dramatic split scene as Louis tells Prior that he is leaving and Joe admits to Harper that he does feel attracted to men. The scene transfers to the screen losing only one exchange of about five lines between Prior and Louis. The deletion is not material to the plot.

Act II, Scene 10. This scene is deleted from the film in its entirety. Not an important scene, perhaps, but a nicely written character moment for Hannah Pitt. Joe's mother and her friend, Sister Ella Chapter, a real estate saleswoman

(played in the theater by the actress playing The Angel) are taking in the impressive view from the front yard of Hannah's Salt Lake City home. Hannah is putting her house on the market, and the two women share thoughts about real estate, Mormonism, friendship and the delights of a puff or two on a forbidden cigarette. It is a shame to lose this moment of relatively "softness" in development of Hannah's persona.

Act III, Scene 1, is complete except that nine words are cut from the lines of the first ghost. Prior 1 and Prior 2 have been sent to announce to eminent arrival of The Angel.

Act III, Scene 2, is edited so that it is intercut to overlap with the preceding scene. This scene – a split scene with Louis and Belize in the coffee shop and with Prior and his nurse, Emily, in the clinic – has lost slightly more than four pages of Louis' ramblings and Belize's retorts. The deleted material is interesting and fun to watch on stage but, in all candor, the loss will be hardly noticed in the film. The sequence of material in the film melding the other half of the split scene, Prior's clinical examination and brief nude scene, is slightly altered from the original script, but is otherwise unchanged. The end of this scene, a further exchange between Louis and Belize, has been shortened by nearly another full page.

Act III, Scene 3, Harper's hallucinatory visit to Antarctica is shortened by deleting five lines from Harper's speech and one line of Mr. Lies. Scene 4, Hannah and the Woman in the South Bronx, transfers to the screen with no

alteration in dialogue. Scene 5, Roy with Joe Pitt, and subsequently with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, is retained with only three very minor alterations (one for Joe, two for Ethel) in wording.

Act III, Scene 6, is unchanged. Prior is again visited by the ghosts of two of his ancestors who announce The Angel's approach. Prior and a spectral version of Louis dance romantically to "Moon River." In Scene 7, Louis and Joe meet and talk. Louis begins to leave to go home; hesitantly, Joe follows. This half of the split scene is unchanged from the play. Meanwhile, Prior is home alone and – with grand visual and sound effects – he receives a visitor who enters by way of crashing through his bedroom ceiling. In the film, The Angel has gained one word of dialogue, "Prepare!" Prior's "God Almighty ... Very Stephen Spielberg" is cut.

Script v. Screenplay – *Perestroika*

Act I, Scene 1, is deleted in its entirety. A pity, since this monologue by Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik, contains the first explicit reference to the concept of stasis, the need to eliminate change and restrict movement. The Bolshevik will say progress and change are fine, but only when a theory has been proposed and accepted that will direct and control such movement. The conflict between progress and movement v. stasis will constitute the philosophical argument between the Continental Principalities, the Apparatchik/Bureaucrat Angels, and their designated prophet, Prior Walter. The deletion of this scene also disconnects the rest of the film adaptation from

any connection to the Russian context of “perestroika” (translation: reconstruction), and the programs that Russian leader Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev began in 1985 that transformed (some say led to the fall of) the Soviet Union in 1989. Admittedly, even in the play that connection was fairly tenuous in the first place. Yet, in the play there is a nice connection between this Bolsheviki “prologue” and the comments in the epilogue as Louis mentions Gorbachev and Soviet-style “perestroika” and Hannah talks about the need for a theory.

HANNAH: You need an idea of the world to go out into the world. But it’s the going into that makes the idea. You can’t wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory. (P-147).

Disc 2 of the DVD set begins with *Perestroika*, Act I, Scene 2. Joe and Louis in a slow, essentially mutual seduction which ends as the men begin to undress. About eighteen lines of their dialogue have been trimmed. The camera in close-up gives the audience all the information that had been contained in the deleted lines.

The screenplay now jumps ahead to Act I, Scene 5. In his bed at home, Prior telephones Belize at work in the hospital. Prior simply has to share the news of his “miraculous” wet dream and of the female visitor who caused it to happen. Roy’s Cohn is admitted to the hospital and his doctor arrives at the nurses station to tell Belize how to care for his famous patient. In response, Belize and Prior (still on the telephone) sing, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Twenty-nine lines of campy banter have been deleted from this scene. The

crackling dialogue between Belize and his new patient, Roy, is barely changed from the play, Act I, Scene 6; one line is cut from a Belize speech.

The film then jumps back to Act I, Scene 3, with Harper, Mr. Lies, Joe and one chewed-down pine tree from the Botanical Gardens Arboretum. The scene has minor alterations and deletions in dialogue with no substantive change in content. Scene 4, a brief scene with Hannah arriving at Joe and Harper's empty apartment and taking a telephone call from the police only deletes one line.

The next scene from the original script would be Act I, Scene 7. This nine-page split scene has been entirely deleted from the film. The portion of the scene involving Harper and Hannah in the Pitt apartment is completely lost. The other half of the split scene involves Joe and Louis as they behave like adolescents who have just invented gay sex. Kushner will find a place to restore some of their deleted dialogue later in the Jones Beach scene of the screenplay.

The screenplay continues directly into Act II, Scene 1. One of Prior's lines is modified very slightly. Scene 2 contains Prior's narration to Belize describing The Angel's visit that occurred at the end of *Millennium Approaches*. This thirteen-page prophetic and erotic flashback is abridged by nearly three pages.

After a brief transitional scene using Louis and Joe fragments from the unused Act I, Scene 7, the film moves directly to Act III, Scene 1, with Roy, Belize and the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg in Roy's hospital room. The dialogue in this concluding scene of the film's Chapter 4 is a complete duplicate of the play

script except for the absence of two words (“lifetime supply” (P-60)) in Belize’s comments regarding Roy’s personal stash of AZT (azidothymidine, an antiretroviral drug, the first approved treatment for HIV). Roy Cohn, talking to the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg ends the scene and the chapter with the following speech.

ROY: ... The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan: He’s so healthy he’s hardly human, he’s a hundred if he’s a day, he takes a slug in his chest and two days later he’s out west riding ponies in his PJ’s. I mean who does that? That’s America. It’s just no country for the infirm. (P-62)

Chapter 5, “Beyond Nelly,” of the HBO Film commences with the *Perestroika* material in Act III, Scene 2. The Mormon Visitor Center Diorama Room scene is complex, thickly textured and features, at different times, Hannah, Harper and Prior, various voices and personifications of mannequins in the diorama, and finally Louis and Joe. The very end of this scene, an exchange between Harper and the diorama figure of the Mormon Mother, is cut but is reinserted in the film after the Jones Beach scene.

Act III, Scene 3, follows. This is the Jones Beach scene between Louis and Joe that contains the full-frontal nude scene where Joe Pitt offers himself completely, body and soul to Louis. The Joe/Louis dialogue is abbreviated by eliminating seven lines. Louis’ quasi-political diatribe is expanded. It would seem that Louis simply does not know when to shut up. In the film, Joe’s nude

scene is photographed and edited such that in frontal view he is only seen from the waist up.

The screenplay now jumps to Act III, Scene 5, which, with minor deletions, contains the remainder of the dialogue between Harper and the mannequin of the Mormon Mother in the Diorama. One of the deleted lines references, “Towers filled with fire,” a reference probably deleted post-9/11/2001 with the attack upon and collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

The film returns to Act III, Scene 4, between Belize and Roy Cohn; inserts a visual lead-in for an upcoming meeting in Union Square; and then merges directly into Act IV, Scene 1, a split scene with meetings between Roy and Joe (seeking a “father’s” blessing) and between Louis and Prior, and finally between Roy and Joe and Ethel Rosenberg. The very end of this fantastic scene, twelve lines, is deleted from the screenplay.

Act IV, Scene 2, is retained virtually intact. Prior and Belize go the Federal Courthouse to stalk and get a look at Joe Pitt. An amusing interlude, every word of the play’s script is retained except the final line, Belize’s final retort directed at Joe: “I am trapped in a world of white people. That’s *my* problem.” (P-93). Personally, I am at a loss to understand why this campy, funny line was deleted from the film screenplay.

Act IV, Scene 3, presents Louis and Belize at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. About three lines have been trimmed with no significant loss of expressive content. Scene 4 follows with Joe and Hannah finally connecting, at

the Mormon Visitors Center. As soon as Joe leaves, Prior enters. He collapses and Hannah takes Prior to the hospital. There are no significant changes between stage and film dialogue in this scene.

There are only two insignificant word changes in the material from Act IV, Scene 5, a brief scene between Joe and Harper. Then the screenplay jumps to Act IV, Scene 7. This climactic scene between Joe and Harper will end Chapter 5 in the film and includes the female nude scene (computer generated) where Harper demands of Joe, "What do you see?" and he responds, "Nothing." (P-107).

The film's final Chapter, "Heaven, I'm In Heaven," begins by jumping back to Act IV, Scene 6. Prior and Hannah are at the hospital with nurse Emily. Almost as a throw away line, Emily tells Prior to "Stop moving. STAY PUT" (P-102) and moments later Hannah commands Prior to "Just lie still." (P-104) None of the lines for this scene in the script are eliminated, but the scene is interrupted by a shot of Joe walking in a heavy rain, approaching Louis' apartment. We return to the hospital room with Prior and Hannah discussing the signs he is experiencing that indicate the approach of The Angel. The sequence of the original theatrical script is then resumed with the Joe and Louis confrontation scene and their dramatic fight, Act IV, Scene 8. This material from the play is retained without alteration. Then follows Scene 9, the death of Roy, as witnessed by Belize and the ghost of Ethel. This dialogue of this scene is also retained with no alteration.

The film then moves into Act V, Scene 1, material. Hannah and Prior observe the return of The Angel, dressed in black robes for this scene. Prior wrestles with The Angel (accompanied by highly effective visual effects), he gains permission to enter heaven, and leaves the hospital room by climbing up a flaming ladder. Hannah and The Angel have a brief but intense encounter. This scene translates to the screen with no change in dialogue.

The film begins Act V, Scene 2, with Prior wandering around a black and white heaven. Only his prophet's robe is colorized a vivid red. Despite the view of the Golden Gate Bridge in the far background, the ruins photographed are actually near Tivoli, Italy as the film crew wanders about the Villa d'Este and the Villa Gregoriana. More than two full pages of dialogue between Prior and, of all people, Harper has been eliminated. Only the final line of the scene has been retained as The Angel declares, "Greetings, Prophet, We have been waiting for you." (P-123)

The screenplay continues into Act V, Scene 3. Louis is summoned by Belize to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, over the body of Roy Cohn. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg helps Louis to remember the Hebrew words of the prayer. Belize also utilizes Louis as a "pack mule" to smuggle Roy's personal stash of AZT out of the hospital. The words of this scene are not altered from the original script.

The film completely skips over Scene 4, a short transitional moment between Joe Pitt and the ghost of Roy Cohn and an even briefer sardonic

exchange between Joe and Harper. The film also skips the first four pages of Scene 5, picking up with The Angel's apology, "Most August Fellow Principalities, Angels Most High: I regret my absence at this session. I was detained." (P-132). The remainder of Scene 5 is played without further change except that two short lines are excised from The Angel's lengthy pleadings with Prior that he should not desire "more life."

Act V, Scenes 6 and 7, are deleted in their entirety and the screenplay continues directly into Scene 8.⁸ This scene marks the beginning of the end of the story as Prior starts to wrap up certain loose ends in his life. Kushner's dialogue for this scene includes a very funny *homage* to *The Wizard of Oz* and the dialogue in Dorothy's return to Kansas scene. Kushner here also gives Prior a Blanche-Dubois-moment with the line, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." That gives Hannah her exit line, "Well that's a stupid thing to do." (P-141).

Act V, Scene 9, is a split scene. The film deals first with the second half of the scripted scene as Louis tells Prior, "I want to come back to you." Prior response is, "... you can't come back. Not ever. I'm sorry but you can't." (P-143) The screenplay then returns to the top of Scene 9 as Harper demands that Joe give her his credit card. She slaps Joe and then gives him two Valium tablets as a departure gift. No lines are deleted in the switch of sequence.

⁸ These same deletions to Act V (Scene 5 beginning, Scenes 6 and 7) are suggested by Kushner as pertaining to possible cuts in performance of the play. See "Playwright's

Screenwriter Kushner has created a new final scene for Joe Pitt which is not in the theater script. Hannah returns to Brooklyn by subway and stops to listen to a group of Amish-like singers performing on the street corner. As Hannah starts to sing along with “Shall We Gather At The River?,” we see Joe crossing the street toward her. They make eye contact. She asks if she should make supper for him that evening after work. He does not answer her directly, but dully and seemingly without energy or hope, Joe disappears down the stairs into the subway.

Act V, Scene 10, follows, with no change to the original script. Harper is flying westward in a jumbo jet window seat. Harper’s final words in the film do suggest a substantial measure of energy and hope.

The Epilogue, also uncut, shows Prior, Belize, and Louis joining Hannah at Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain. It is five years later, now winter 1990, and Prior looks to the future. “The fountain’s not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it’s a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be.” (P-148).

Notes,” pp 9-10, *Perestroika*, 1994)..

Chapter 4

“THE ART OF OMISSION” – The Opera Libretto

Pity the poor librettist. Audience members leaving an opera performance may discuss an individual singer’s performance, the sets and costumes or the conductor’s interpretation of the composer’s score. You will almost never hear discussion of the actual text: the meaning of the lyric for the diva’s best known aria; the text of the recitative that moves the story along; the non-musical elements of the stage action as contained in the libretto.

A powerful reason that opera librettists are relatively unknown in America is, of course, that opera today is almost always performed in Italian (or German, French, Russian or Czech). English language opera has generally been unsuccessful in the United States – with the notable exceptions of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Billy Budd* (1951) – at least until the advent of contemporary American operas such as Philip Glass’ *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and John Adams’ *Nixon in China* (1987) and *Doctor Atomic* (2005).

In the contemporaneous field of musical theater, a few book and lyric writers do receive acknowledgment as full members of the creative team. Oscar Hammerstein II is a full partner of Richard Rodgers in the creation of their string of highly successful Broadway musicals. And only a few will have heard Sir Arthur Sullivan’s music without the scintillating contribution of William Gilbert’s

witty lyrics. But these gentlemen are exceptions who give support to my premise that the wordsmith is usually the forgotten man in this collaborative art.

And sometimes that is the way that it should be. Opera libretti were often of little literary value, at least by contemporary standards. And sometimes they were of limited musical value as well. Fortunately, there have been some exceptionally talented exceptions.

Lorenzo Da Ponte's Italian language libretti for *La nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (1790) helped to make Wolfgang Mozart's magnificent operas "high-water marks" of Western culture. Arrigo Boito did much the same service for Verdi's *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). And, I might argue the greatest and most successful composer/librettist team of modern opera produced the masterpieces that are the Richard Strauss/Hugo von Hofmannsthal *Elektra* (1909), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912; rev. 1916).

According to Professor Robert Greenberg, the earliest opera for which a complete score is extant is Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*.⁹ The work was premiered in Florence on October 6, 1600. Peri was an active member of the Florentine Camerata, a group of Renaissance scholars and musicians strongly influenced by concepts of Grecian ideals of form, balance and content in dramatic and musical

⁹ Greenberg, formerly with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, is a highly popular lecturer for The Teaching Company. Reference here is to his "How to Listen to and Understand Opera," a course of thirty-two 45 minute lectures, Lecture 1. Greenberg notes that Peri and others had produced true operas before 1600.

performance. Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), the earliest acknowledged opera masterpiece by today's standards soon followed. *Orfeo* (1607) is still regularly performed in fully staged or concert performance in the twenty-first century.

Gradually, the form (or, better, the formulae) for opera presentation became rigid and static. Chorus, recitative, aria, duet, etc. numbers in predictable progression – with mandatory dance (“ballet”) numbers added when staging French Opera – became *de rigueur*. This structure was understood and anticipated – sometimes even demanded – by the audience, at least until Richard Wagner (1813-1883) thrust his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* into Western operatic consciousness in 1865 with *Tristan und Isolde* and his subsequent music dramas. (It should be noted that Wagner wrote his own libretti).

When considering the adaptation of an existing work – book, play, story, film – to the operatic stage, the composer and librettist, hopefully working in close collaboration, must first decide what elements of the original material they wish to highlight, to emphasize musically, and thereby they identify what elements need to be minimized or deleted. This exercise – the Art of Omission – is vitally important, perhaps less so when the composer is Mozart or Verdi, but even these giants can be handicapped by clunky, poorly worded, or silly lyrics and story. The key distinction, of course, is the librettist's literary skill, intelligence and empathetic understanding of the underlying emotional truth of the basic “story” being adapted.

There are two basic approaches to the adaptation effort. The simpler approach, perhaps, is to identify a small number of episodes that capture the essence of the story and to focus only on those aspects. Any material extraneous to this goal is removed, and thereafter largely ignored. The second approach would be to attempt to retain as much as possible of the “big picture” in the adaptation, essentially trimming as little as possible while still getting the audience out of the theater before midnight. Neither approach is always totally satisfactory. But it can be done. For example, Shakespeare’s *Othello* runs about 3400 lines; Boito’s marvelous libretto for Verdi’s *Otello* covers all the essential information in approximately 600 lines.

Or, perhaps the composer feels the need to alter aspects of the original in order to meet his own musical story-telling objectives. In considering *Otello*, note that Shakespeare’s Desdemona is lively, clever and often pro-active. Verdi sought to make his Desdemona more passive, innocent and naïve. Both interpretations are valid and can be made to work well on stage.

Consider also Charles Gounod’s *Faust* (1895), a massive five-act adaptation of Goethe’s *Faust, Part I*. The libretto focuses on very specific and limited elements of the original and, wisely for operatic purposes, simply ignores the rest, and the opera uncut still lasts for more than four hours.

In Giacomo Puccini’s *La bohème* (1896), Acts I and IV are directly based on material in Henri Mürger’s *Scenes de la vie de bohème*. Acts II and III, however, are rather more loosely based on events and locations in the novel, as

librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa required greater creative license in order to meet dramatic and musical objectives.

Sometimes, librettists also have had to deal with non-musical concerns. Pierre Beaumarchais' anti-aristocrat play, *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* ran afoul of Vienna's censors but the Mozart-Da Ponte adaptation *La Nozze di Figaro* was cleared by the censors when altered to become instead a hymn to marriage and, more or less, to monogamy. Composer Giuseppe Verdi and librettist Francesco Piave ran afoul of Austrian authorities (then in control of Venice and much of northern Italy) when they adapted *Le roi s'amuse* by Victor Hugo into the opera ultimately titled *Rigoletto*. Putting the French king (Francis I) in less than honorable situations in the opera libretto, as Victor Hugo had done in the novel, was considered an act of *lèse majesté*; demoting the tenor role of the king to that of a mere Duke of Mantua solved the adaptor's main problem. The censors in Rome and Naples also had a field day with Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) based on Eugène Scribe's *Gustave III*, a play portraying the actual 1792 assassination of the King of Sweden. After the censors were finished with Antonio Somma's libretto, the opera's location had been moved to North America where the conspirators' target became Riccardo, Earl of Warwick, the governor of colonial Boston. (The adjustments to those libretti for non-musical reasons has not dampened popular acclaim. Both *Figaro* and *Ballo* are among today's more frequently produced operas worldwide).

When a good librettist must cut and pare and reshape the original text to

fit the artistic needs of musical expression; he/she must also be faithful to the emotional truth at the core of the source material. When the librettist succeeds at this job, the composer is then free to exercise his/her talents to their fullest degree.

The world premiere of *Angels in America*, an opera in two parts, by Hungarian composer Péter Eötvös, occurred on 23 November 2004 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. The libretto, in English, was written by Mari Mezei, the wife of composer Eötvös. The project had the approval, if not the active participation, of the play's author, Tony Kushner.

A detailed analysis of the music composed by Eötvös for *Angels in America* is beyond the scope of this paper. This chapter will focus on the adaptation of Kushner's original script to the operatic stage by librettist Mari Mezei. But, before proceeding to analysis of the libretto, I should mention that the score, to my ear, is somewhat similar to Alban Berg's final opera, *Lulu* (1935). Eötvös has provided no identifiable set-piece arias or choruses; he frequently uses spoken dialogue over background music, and he provides no readily identifiable or memorable tunes, themes or leitmotifs. Some reviewers were highly positive in their comments concerning the Eötvös score. For example Bernard Holland, *New York Times*, June 19, 2006 wrote:

“Mr. Eotvos's music augments traditional strings, winds and brass with saxophones, guitars, electronic keyboards, exotic percussion, ringing telephones and sirens. The vocal lines can ease into speech and usually operate against drifting clouds of sound. Mr. Eotvos's success with prosody outstrips that of most American opera composers in his ability to fit music to the flow of American English. He has written truly theatrical music that advances texts rather than calling attention to itself.”

And, according to Paul Driver, *The Sunday Times* (London), April 4, 2010,

“ ... his two-hour musical setting completes the transformation of the sprawingly verbal into the concisely patterned and purely atmospheric. For what makes the score so effective is the way it replaces the anguished human concerns and polemical energies of the drama – focused on the misery and defiance to two New Yorkers struck down by the disease – with the free play of orchestral colour. Opera doesn’t have to take up “issues”: it can simply offer beautiful vibrations. There was an eclectic magic, I found, to Eotvos’ invention.”

Casting

Eötvös score requires eight principal singers: The Angel is sung by a soprano; the role of Harper is assigned to a soprano “(with wide range)”. The role of Hannah Pitt is written for a mezzo-soprano “(with wide range).” In casting the world premiere production, the company was very fortunate to acquire the American-born soprano Barbara Hendricks (who now lives in Europe and is a citizen of Sweden) to sing The Angel; American mezzo Julia Migenes singing Harper; and American soprano Roberta Alexander sang Hannah.

In the men’s roles, the cast featured American counter-tenor Derek Lee Ragin as Belize; Finnish tenor Topi Lehtipuu as Louis; American baritone Daniel Belcher as Prior; English baritone Omar Ebrahim as Joe Pitt; and Scottish bass-baritone Donald Maxwell as Roy Cohn.

Except The Angel and Prior Walter, all the principals will appear on stage in at least one additional role. “Hannah” also covers Rabbi Chemelwitz and Henry, the doctor; “Harper” also sings the role of Ethel Rosenberg; “Joe Pitt” and “Roy Cohn” double as the two ghostly prior Prior Walters; and “Belize” will also

take the roles of “Mr. Lies” and “The Woman in the Bronx.” And everyone, except “Prior,” will appear as an Angel in the penultimate scene. The staging of the Paris premiere also included about eight chorus member/stage hands who moved about the stage during several scenes.

Structure

The *Angels in America* opera libretto covers the material in *Millennium Approaches* in Part 1, which is divided into eleven scenes with a running time of about ninety minutes. *Perestroika*'s content is covered (more or less) in Part 2 of the opera; seven scenes (Scenes 12 through 18) which require about sixty minutes to perform. This defines the central problem of the librettist: how to condense nearly seven hours of theatrical dialogue into about two and one half hours musical performance? Interestingly, Mezei's approach to a solution seems to be based, almost exclusively, on a liberal process of “cut and paste.” Virtually every word contained in Mezei's libretto can be found in Kushner's original text.¹⁰

Script v. Libretto – Part 1 (*Millennium Approaches*)

Scene 1 of the opera begins, without overture, with the eulogy for Sarah Ironson delivered by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz. In the opera, as in the play, the role of the Rabbi is covered by the actress playing Hannah. The first half of the

¹⁰ I am deeply indebted to several individuals at Schott Musik International in New York and in Frankfurt, Germany for their assistance in obtaining a copy of the Mezei libretto for *Angels in America*. A copy of the DVD recording of the November 29, 2004 performance of the Paris world premiere production was obtained through the generosity of Mr. Lloyd L. Thoms, Jr. of Greenville, Delaware

Rabbi's speech from the play is retained, word for word. The second half of the eulogy is deleted. Near the end of the Rabbi's scene, the libretto inserts material from Act I, Scene 4 of *Millennium Approaches* with Prior and Louis off to the side of the congregation bickering, and Prior discloses his HIV infection to Louis. Scene 1 of the opera concludes with brief elements of the discussion between Louis and the Rabbi taken from Act I, Scene 5 of the play. "Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?" (M-25). Rather than delivering the eulogy directly to the audience, as in the original version, here the Rabbi addresses an on-stage group of about twelve mourners.

Scene 2 in the opera becomes a split scene, combining the *Millennium Approaches* Act I, Scenes 2 and 3 material in the play. The material that introduces both Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn is divided in two parts, separated by the introduction of Harper Pitt (and her initial conversation with the imaginary "Mr. Lies"). All of the material used by librettist Mezei in this scene is lifted verbatim from Kushner's script. With a singing actress like Julia Migenes, this musical introduction to the character of Valium-addicted Harper Pitt is riveting; the music provided for Roy Cohn seems much too slow and legato for this hyper-active character, who is supposedly busy in this scene on several telephone lines simultaneously. As staged in Paris, the scene is distractingly crowded with extras in business suits moving rapidly about. Louis walks by Roy's office without speaking in this scene but he and Joe Pitt do make extended eye contact

while Roy is busy on the telephone.

Scene 3 is the mutual dream sequence taken from Act I, Scene 7 of *Millennium*. Prior and Harper interact convincingly despite a loss of nearly two pages of Kushner's stage dialogue. The staging of this scene in the Paris production of the opera is dark and disturbing. Harper toys with a pistol, playing Russian roulette at one point, and she caresses a hangman's noose. Prior also plays with the rope at one point. These "suicidal" suggestions were jarring. Mezei may have added five words of original text to this scene (i.e., "... up and down the avenues") in Prior's response to Harper's question, "Do homos take, like, lots of long walks?" (I found everything else in the libretto for this scene somewhere in the original Kushner text). Mezei excised at least three pages of the theater script from this scene.

Scene 4 of the opera combines some of the Louis and Prior material from Act I, Scene 8 of the play; the first hearing of the Angel's voice from Act I, Scene 7; and Prior's collapse and Louis' frantic call to 911 from Act II, Scene 1. All this material fits together well and moves the action along briskly.

In Scene 5 the libretto presents Joe and Harper in material that originally was included in a split scene with Louis and Prior in Act I, Scene 8 (now Scene 4 of the opera). At the end of the Scene 5, Harper finally blurts out to Joe, "Are you a homo?"

Scene 6 works fairly well, despite the loss of about three and one half pages of the dialogue between Roy Cohn and Henry, his doctor (a role assigned to

the actress playing Hannah). Mezei chooses to insert here some of the Ethel Rosenberg material from Act III, Scene 5 of *Millennium*. (Unlike the play or teleplay where this role is given to Hannah, Ethel is portrayed in the opera by the actress assigned the role of Harper). Again, Roy rejects Henry's diagnosis of AIDS and insists that his medical records must indicate he has liver cancer.

In the libretto Scene 7 becomes a split scene, beginning with a small portion of the Act II, Scene 3 dialogue between Louis and Emily, the nurse. (The character Emily is deleted from the opera; her lines are given to Belize). After Louis exits, on the verge of leaving Prior and abandoning their relationship, the libretto then shifts the action to the Act II, Scene 8 telephone conversation between Joe Pitt in Central Park and his mother, Hannah, in Salt Lake City. This scene in the opera continues by returning to material from Act II, Scene 5 of the play and shows Prior in his hospital room explaining to Belize that he "hears voices." Finally, after Belize leaves, Prior has a somewhat extended conversation with the (as yet unseen) Angel.

Scene 8 uses about six lines between Joe and Louis taken from Act II, Scene 7; a dozen or so lines from Act III, Scene 7; and five lines from *Perestroika* Act I, Scene 6. This very short scene brings Louis and Joe together face-to-face for the first time in the opera, indulges them in a brief mutual seduction and sends them off together to Louis' home and bed for the night. Their encounter comes off as abrupt and callous. Deleted is the play's sometimes tender, quasi-romantic, and often funny treatment of their awkward situation. Several of the extras

wander into and out of the scene, suggesting rather seedy-looking men furtively cruising the park for a homosexual pick up.

Scene 9 in the opera is the *Millennium Approaches* Act III, Scene 4 encounter between Hannah, Joe's mother, newly arrived in New York from Salt Lake City, and a homeless woman in the South Bronx (sung by the actor playing Belize). The libretto uses only about one half of the spoken material in the script. The result is that Hannah's power seems reduced, compared to this scene in the play, and The Woman lacks any sense of being grounded, even if only in some alternate reality. Hannah enters the scene from the audience and The Woman comes down into the audience briefly to deliver several of her lines.

Scene 10 is the split scene from Act II, Scene 9 as Louis finally breaks up with Prior and Joe confesses the truth of his homosexuality to Harper, who immediately runs off with Mr. Lies. Only about one quarter of the scripted material is retained in the libretto. The abridgement retains the basic character development information, but the background, subtlety and layering of information in the original script is largely gone. The scene begins as Louis and Prior leap out of their king-sized bed to argue; moments later the audience discovers that Joe and Harper are together (in that same bed). It is not suggested that anything bizarrely sexual has been going on between the four of them ... or is it?

Scene 11 features Prior's two ghost ancestors (prior Prior Walters) (combining elements of Act III, Scenes 1 and 6) and the arrival of The Angel (Act

III, Scene 7). The staging for the opera premiere in Paris was simple, and effective. The scene is short, but not abrupt. The ghosts were wheeled in and out quickly and fairly smoothly. Prior and his hospital bed levitate about twelve feet above the stage for a moment, gently returning to the floor while the ghosts continue to herald the arrival of the heavenly messenger. The levitation may represent the sexual arousal that Prior always experiences when the Angel approaches. The Angel is flown in leisurely in a crane-supported cage, like some ancient *deus ex machina*. Not as dramatic an entrance, of course, as suddenly “crashing” through Prior’s bedroom ceiling, but effective all the same. Soprano Barbara Hendricks in a white satin pants suit with wings on her back, as The Angel, made the most of her opportunity, singing powerfully and convincingly.

Script v. Libretto – Part 2 (*Perestroika*)

Part 2 of the opera begins with Scene 12, staged as if continuous in real time to the end of Part 1. In the theater, this scene is a flashback as Prior explains to Belize what happened when the Angel first appeared to him (material from Act II, Scene 2 of the play, *Perestroika*). In the libretto, this scene is played out between only Prior and the Angel. This does help establish continuity between Parts 1 and 2 that is not as readily available when *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* are performed as separate plays. Prior and the bed, now stage right, again levitate to nearly twenty feet above the stage for about one minute as The Angel descends to the stage. A stage hand now appears and assists The Angel to disconnect from the flying apparatus. The “20-something” stage hand is wearing

only white cherub-like wings, very brief white shorts, white socks and white tennis shoes.

Scene 13 is constructed as a triple scene in the libretto using three lines from Act I, Scene 6 (Joe and Louis); three lines from *Millennium* Act II, Scene 3 (Harper); seven lines from Act III, Scene 1 and twenty lines of an exchange between Harper and Hannah that are not included in published *Angels in America* scripts but that are found in an earlier published version of the script as used in the 1992-1993 Royal National Theatre production in London. Returning to *Perestroika*, librettist Mezei then cuts and pastes material from Act II, Scene 2 for Prior and Belize; more material from the London production for Joe and Louis; and six lines from the Jones Beach scene (Act III, Scene 4) for Joe and Louis. This is now a transitional scene that, with all the frantic cut and paste effort, should be a hodge-podge of tangled meanings. Actually, in mood and tone, the stitched-together pieces present an effective and moving portrait of the characters at this point in the story. At the beginning of this scene, Louis and Joe jump into the bed, cover themselves completely with the sheet, and the bed rises about twelve feet. They both remain suspended above the action until the scene's conclusion.

Scene 14 takes place in Roy's hospital room between Roy, Belize, and later the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg. The libretto includes material from Act III, Scene 2; six lines from Act I, Scene 5; and Act IV, Scene 9 concluding with the death of Roy. This plays as an abrupt moment, with surprisingly little emotional

content. Roy dies, with little fuss or bother, and the libretto moves directly and smoothly into the next scene.

Scene 15 takes place at the Mormon Visitors' Centre in Manhattan. Using lines from Act III, Scene 3 and Act IV, Scene 4, Mezei brings together Hannah and Joe, Hannah and the Woman from the Bronx, and finally Hannah with Prior, concluding with Hannah's taking Prior to the hospital. The libretto only requires two pages for this scene. The essential plot points are covered and the story moves along quickly.

Scene 16 occurs in Prior's hospital room as Prior and Hannah discuss visions (Act IV, Scene 6). The empty bed flies in from the wings about twelve feet off the floor, and is then lowered to the stage. The Angel arrives (Act V, Scene 1), wrestles with Prior, and sends him up to Heaven to argue with the angelic council. This conflation of materials does work well and moves the opera swiftly to the next scene. The Angel now is dressed in a black satin pants suit with black wings. About eight winged cherubs, all wearing only white shorts, tennis shoes and socks, now enter and rearrange the set for the next scene.

The script for *Perestroika*, Act V, Scene 5 is manipulated and abridged in Scene 17 of the libretto but most of Kushner's lines survive intact. This is Prior's showdown before the Council of Continental Principalities. He rejects the role of prophet, explains that human nature cannot stop moving, changing, progressing. Prior demands, "I want more life!" The six Continental Principalities, all in white suits, each with a different color for their wings, are portrayed by the singers cast

as Harper, Hannah, Louis, Joe, Belize and Roy.

The libretto now brings the opera to a close with a brief Scene 18 supposedly set in New York City, but in the Paris production looking more like a heavenly ante-chamber outside the Council Room that we left at the end of Scene 17. In eleven short lines Prior concludes the opera, with a slight assist from Louis, Belize and Hannah, by saying, “Bye now,” and by repeating as a mantra, “More life.”

Subsequent productions of the Eötvös/Mezei *Angels in America* were staged by Opera Unlimited Boston in June 2006, Fort Worth (Texas) Opera in May-June 2008, and by the Frankfurt (Germany) Oper in March-April 2009. A concert performance was sung and broadcast world wide from London’s Barbican Centre on 26 March 2010.

The opera does succeed on several levels. It is interesting musically, if not in the “tuneful” tradition of Italian and French opera of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kushner’s original story naturally lends itself to “operatic” interpretation. The libretto, wisely I think, uses only Kushner’s words, thereby retaining some of his American accent/idioms.

Opera goers who are familiar with the source material for *Angels in America* will probably enjoy the opera a great deal more than those not familiar with the Kushner plays. Since the process of adaptation for the opera *Angels in America* involved “cut and paste” operations almost exclusively, the question could be phrased, “What got left on the cutting room floor?” Always bearing in

mind that different media have different requirements and methods of expression
– and that it simply takes longer to sing than to speak the same number of words –
it would be fair in this case to conclude that one can measure the degree of
success of the adaptation through analysis of the material deleted.

Chapter 5

“LEFT ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR”

Chapter 3 examined the opera *Angels in America*, in performance generally and in its libretto specifically, analyzing the cut-and-paste adaptation process employed by the composer-librettist team. In that chapter each scene of the opera was compared with corresponding sections of the original theatrical script, objectively attempting to evaluate the opera libretto on its own terms as a separate and distinct work of art. The challenge for the Eötvös/Mezei team from the beginning was to decide what material from the plays had to be left out. Compressing almost seven hours of theatrical action and dialogue into two and one half hours in the opera house required some major decisions and refocusing, often cutting to the bare bone of the play’s script or even amputating entire sections, themes and characters.

This chapter will peruse the operatic *Angels in America* libretto from the opposite point of view. It is my contention that another valid approach in evaluating the opera’s degree of success as an adaptation of Tony Kushner’s original work is to determine what material librettist Mari Mezei chose to leave out.

What the Librettist Took Out – Part One

Millennium Approaches fares reasonably well in Mezei’s adaptation. Kushner’s original material is manipulated and condensed, generally with care

and skill. In Scene 1 of the opera, the Rabbi's eulogy is retained up to the line describing America as, "this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted." (M-10) The remainder of the eulogy is discarded. In the Théâtre du Châtelet production of 2004, the rabbi addresses the eulogy to a group of on-stage mourners thereby restoring the "fourth wall." In the theater, the Rabbi addresses his remarks to the entire house, breaking the fourth wall, and making each audience member more than just a passive observer. This loss of "inclusivity" might distance some opera attendees from identification with some of the characters or situations in the story.

Less than thirty percent of the lines for Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn are retained in Scene 2. I believe that both characters, but especially Roy, are weakened considerably by this drastic shortening of the material. A further dilution of Roy's power/capacity for evil is caused by the slow, drawn out delivery of many of his lines because of the demands (tempo, phrasing, conjunct vocal line) of the music composed for this scene.

Similarly, Harper's first appearance, also in Scene 2, her soliloquy regarding the ozone layer, and her conversation with Mr. Lies are all important to the audience as an introduction to Harper's character and situation. At least sixty percent of her lines in this scene have been cut, but the libretto does retain part of Mr. Lies' speech about the International Order of Travel Agents: "We mobilize the globe, we set people adrift, we stir the populace and send nomads eddying across the planet" (M-17). This is an important pre-echo of the stasis v. change/

status quo v. progress dynamic that is the main thrust of The Angel's message in *Perestroika*.

Prior's disclosure to Louis of his first KS lesion was abruptly inserted into Scene 1 of the opera and most of the remainder of Act I, Scene 4 of the play is deleted. Lost is the gallows humor in much of the conversation between the lovers. We also lose much of the flavor of Louis' Jewishness, as well as his sense of fatalism and low self esteem.

Also deleted is all the Harper and Joe material from Act I, Scene 5. I believe this is a major loss. Besides adding dimension and detail toward understanding the two characters and the state of their relationship, this lost material also lays an important foundation for understanding Kushner's attitudes concerning Mormonism, modern Republicanism in general and "Reagan-ism" in particular. Also deleted is Harper's near desperate attempt to get Joe's physical attention: "I heard on the radio how to give a blowjob" (M-27).

The entire scene in the play set in the men's room of the Federal Court of Appeals between Joe and Louis (Act I, Scene 6), their first meeting in the play, is cut from the libretto. When these two men finally do meet in the opera libretto, their relationship is drastically compressed and made almost entirely physical. Any sense of loss, confusion, loneliness or tenderness between them is thereby diluted and greatly reduced.

The librettist's deletions from the mutual dream scene (Scene 7) do not remove essential plot or character information, but the quality of the fantasy

dreamscape and Prior's campy, playful repartee against Harper's Valium-induced "loopiness" is changed, at least in the Paris production, to a darker and mutually more self-hating and self destructive tone.

From Act I, Scene 8 the libretto discards three pages of material between Joe and Harper which helped to build the tension between them and to further explain how and why their marriage is rapidly disintegrating before our eyes. Also unused is nearly three pages of dialogue between Prior and Louis, including Prior's telling of the grisly tale: "One of my ancestors was a ship's captain who made money bringing whale oil to Europe and returning with immigrants – Irish mostly, packed in tight, so many dollars per head ..." (M-41).

More than three pages are gone from the scene between Roy Cohn and Henry, his doctor (Act I, Scene 9). The dramatic highlights are retained but the exchanges that color and explain Roy's attitudes and hateful behaviors are eliminated. This prefigures the drastic reduction in the importance of Roy's character that will occur over the course of the opera, especially in Part 2 (*Perestroika*).

Act II of *Millennium Approaches* is treated similarly in Part 1 of the opera. Only four lines are retained from Act II, Scene 1. The discarded material would have heightened audience awareness of the severity of Prior's disease. The following Joe/Harper scene (Act II, Scene 2) is completely dropped (one line does appear in Scene 5 of the libretto) and almost all of the subsequent scene between Emily/Belize and Louis has also been discarded. The impact, especially on

audience perception of Louis, is very unfortunate. Because of the cut, Louis loses a multi-dimensionality, a humanizing vulnerability and becomes more a cardboard and stereotypical figure.

Act II, Scene 4 is completely excised from the opera. Thereby lost is an important scene between Joe and Roy, as Roy continues his attempts to recruit Joe for a position in the Department of Justice in Washington, D. C. Also lost is the brief, but important, encounter between Louis and “The Man in the Park.” This stark and disturbing attempt at public sex reveals deeper aspects of Louis’ despair and self-loathing. It also has a couple of the funniest lines in the plays, at least from a gay sensibility point of view. The lines, per se, are not humorous out of context but in the theater, timing and delivery make them unforgettable.

Three quarters of Act II, Scene 5 in *Millennium Approaches* does not make it into the opera libretto. Missing is dialogue between Prior and Belize that is very useful to defining the relationship between these two characters and also in explaining significant background information about Louis’s character and behaviors.

Only five lines from Act II, Scene 6 are found in the libretto. The character of Martin Heller, a Reagan administration crony of Roy Cohn, is eliminated. Unused material includes some of Kushner’s most scathing indictments of Republicanism, the Reagan administration and rampant political corruption in general. It also removes an opportunity for the actress in the role of Harper to perform here in a cameo role as Martin Heller.

Scene 7 of Act II in *Millennium Approaches* is an extended “getting acquainted” scene between Joe and Louis outside the Brooklyn Hall of Justice. Librettist Mezei has retained only four lines of Kushner’s text and moved them to another scene. The remainder of the scene from the play is completely cut.

Act II, Scene 8 has been greatly abbreviated in the libretto, but enough of the telephone exchange between Joe in Central Park and his mother, Hannah, in Salt Lake City remains so that the audience can make the necessary plot and character connections. Act II, Scene 9, on the other hand, is about eighty per cent retained. The lines used in the libretto are the same as in the play, but they have been rearranged, in a cut and paste manner, presumably to reduce overlapping speeches and to conform better to the demands of the music. This is the pivotal split scene in which Louis definitely leaves Prior and Joe definitely leaves Harper. In my view, this is the climatic scene of *Millennium Approaches*, and possibly of *Angels in America*, and retention of more of this material would be most useful to a clearer understanding of character development in all four principals.

Finally, Act II, Scene 10 is eliminated entirely as is the role of Sister Ella Chapter (another cameo role opportunity for the actress playing The Angel). This scene, in front of Hannah’s Salt Lake City house, was likewise cut from the HBO Films teleplay. It would have added some depth and perhaps softened the edges to the character of Hannah.

Millennium Approaches, Act III undergoes the most severe trimming, so far, in terms of reducing the amount of material covered and in shortening the

production running time. Act III, Scene 1, introducing the audience to ancestral Prior Walters 1 and 2, is greatly compressed (and combined with material from Act III, Scene 6). The material eliminated is mostly clever banter between these heralds of the “fabulous incipience” of The Angel and, although its absence is to be regretted, the omission is not critical.

Act III, Scene 2 in the play is a twelve-page political, psychological, sociological and often hysterically funny diatribe delivered by Louis, frequently deflated by a quip from an unimpressed Belize. The scene also includes an exchange between Prior and his nurse, Emily, that usually includes a non-erotic moment of full frontal nudity (Prior) and some unexpected extended lines delivered in Hebrew (Emily). The complete loss of all this material, especially the extended interplay between Louis and Belize, places the audience at a distinct disadvantage (unless they have been exposed to the theater script before attending the opera).

Act III, Scene 3 of the play is also completely eliminated from the libretto. This is useful and amusing material that tells a great deal about Harper (and Mr. Lies and their visit to Antarctica).

The opera libretto does retain about one half of Act III, Scene 4 as Hannah in the South Bronx encounters a homeless woman (played here by Belize). The deleted material is interesting and amusing but the deleted lines are not a major loss to comprehension of the scene.

Act III, Scene 5 was originally set in the study of Roy Cohn’s New York

brownstone and features Roy and Joe, with a later appearance by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg. Almost all of this Roy/Joe material has been deleted from the opera. The Ethel material retained (about one half) is used in the libretto in a hospital scene between Roy and Belize. The unused Roy/Joe material is exceptionally helpful in further defining Roy's character and his utter lack of morals, scruples or ethical standards. Joe's naiveté, confusion and vulnerability are also shown clearly. The omission reduces the political elements of Kushner's original script and, in my opinion, weakens or dilutes the characterizations of both Roy and Joe.

The ghosts of prior Prior Walters reappear in the play in Scene 6 of Act III. Most of this material is retained in the opera libretto, but combined with Act III, Scene 1 elements mentioned above.

Act III, Scene 7 is a split scene in the original script with Louis and Roy going off together to Louis' home and bed. Most of that material is excised; the part of the scene that is retained is relocated to a brief Louis/Roy scene. The remnants of Scene 7 involve the final arrival of The Angel. Prior's lines here are greatly compressed. The Angel (somewhat matter-of-factly) leisurely floats into the scene and the opera's first act curtain falls. Eliminated are lines expressing Prior's real terror, confusion, sexual tumescence, anger and, most unfortunately, awe. Prior's line delivered in reaction to The Angel's entrance: "God almighty . . . *Very Stephen Spielberg.*" (M-118) is replaced by librettist Mezei with, "Oh, my goodness . . ." (libretto 28)

What the Librettist Took Out – Part 2

Part 2 of the opera *Angels in America* covers the material that Tony Kushner included in his play *Perestroika*. When the curtain rises on Part 2, librettist Mezei begins with Prior and The Angel as they are portrayed in Act II, Scene 2 of the play. Mezei, in fact deletes Act I of *Perestroika*, all six scenes, in its entirety. She also completely cuts Act II, Scene 1 for good measure. The deleted material includes the opening scene speech by The World's Oldest Bolshevik, an interesting interlude in Antarctica with Harper, Joe and Mr. Lies, Hannah's arrival in Brooklyn, Roy's admission to the hospital with terminal "liver cancer," a superbly bitchy encounter between Roy and Belize, "one faggot to another," (P-27) ending with a warning to Roy about double blinds, radiation therapy and a new drug called azidothymidine (AZT). Additional material included in this wholesale elimination by librettist Mezei are a lengthy mutual seduction scene between Louis and Joe, and a conversation between Prior and Belize after the funeral of a fabulous drag queen, AIDS victim, and mutual friend. To be fair, two lines from Act I, Scene 5 and six lines from Act II, Scene 1 are used by Mezei elsewhere. This seems to be a great deal of information to deny to the opera audience, but is perhaps a nearly unavoidable consequence of the adaptation process.

Act II, Scene 2 is substantially abridged but much information remains. But, the Angels' concept that human stasis is a necessary precondition for God's

return to Heaven, the fact that He left Heaven on the day of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and a lot of information on the genitalia and sexual proclivities of Angels generally is ignored or glossed over in the Mezei libretto. Most significantly, the tone and “queerness” of the play’s lines is too often diluted or ignored in the libretto. Consider the following:

PRIOR: I. Want. You to go away. I’m tired to death of being done to, walked out on, *infected*, fucked over, and now tortured by some mixed-up reactionary angel, some . . . (P-46).

In Mezei’s adaptation this becomes, “I’m tired to death. Leave me alone.” (libretto pg. 31)

Act III, Scene 1 in *Perestroika* is a split scene with Hannah and Harper learning to cope with each other and without Joe, and with Louis and Joe in bed. Louis abruptly ends their sexual playtime when Joe discloses that he is a Mormon, a surprising and shocking piece of information from Louis’ point of view. Scene 2 in the play reveals Roy’s personal and illicit stash of AZT, contains some biting dialogue between Roy and Belize and features another visit to Roy from Ethel Rosenberg. Almost all of this Act III, Scenes 1 and 2 material is omitted from the opera libretto.

In Act III, Scene 3 of *Perestroika* Kushner takes us to the Diorama Room of the New York City Mormon Visitors’ Center. The opera libretto only briefly lingers there and omits all mention of the Mormon history and theology and the

extended tour through Harper's drug enhanced imagination that was included in the play.

The remainder of Act III – Scenes 4, 5 and 6 – are discarded from the opera. Lost is the very moving Jones Beach scene between Louis and Joe, an effective exchange between Belize and an obviously dying Roy Cohn, and a glimpse of Harper's sense of God and His justice. These deletions greatly reduce the opportunities for audience identification with and empathy for these complex, very human characters. This loss may be part of the unavoidable cost entailed in such an adaptation process, but the cost seems quite heavy.

The first three scenes of Act IV are cut entirely. Therefore, the opera makes no mention of Joe's last visit to Roy in his hospital room, of Louis' failed attempt to explain and excuse himself to Prior, and of Joe's confession of his homosexuality to Roy (Scene 1); and ignores the very funny Scene 2 in the play where Prior and Belize visit the Courthouse in order to discover what Louis' new lover, Joe Pitt, looks like.

PRIOR: (Despairing) He's the Marlboro Man.

BELIZE: Oooh. I wanna see. (P-90)

Act IV, Scene 3 in the play is a lengthy and revealing conversation between Belize and Louis at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. The opera libretto completely ignores this material.

Perestroika Act IV, Scene 4 takes place at the Mormon Visitors' Center and begins with Joe and Hannah and segues to an interaction between Hannah and

Prior. Prior collapses and Hannah escorts him to the hospital. The libretto retains these basic elements but the lines in the script are severely compacted.

Act IV, Scene 5 is a brief exchange between Joe and Harper ending with their going home together. It is not included in the libretto. Scene 6 in Prior's hospital room with Hannah and Emily is also deleted with the exception of four lines.

In Act IV, Scene 7 Joe and Harper finally separate for good; Scene 8 shows the violent, physical fight between an enraged Louis and a bewildered Joe. Both of these scenes, vitally important in the play, are omitted in the opera.

Less than half of the final scene of Act IV, Scene 9 is retained. Roy Cohn dies fairly quietly with only the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg as witness. The drama, tension and nasty humor of the death scene as written for the play is removed from the opera staging.

Act V, Scene 1 allows very little time for Prior to wrestle with The Angel and to gain entrance to Heaven in order to reject his unwanted appointment as Prophet. After Prior's exit from this abbreviated scene, in the play and the HBO film versions, there is an erotic encounter between The Angel and Hannah. This coupling is omitted from the opera libretto.

Act V, Scene 2 (Prior in Heaven meets Harper) is cut from opera, was not used in the TV version, and is usually cut from performances of the play.

Since the libretto heretofore has made no mention of AZT as a treatment choice for Roy's AIDS and of his illegal stash of the drug, it would make no sense

in the opera for Belize to summon Louis to the hospital to become a drug mule to smuggle Roy's medication out of the hospital. And there is even less reason for Louis to be at Roy's bedside saying Kaddish (with a lot of help from the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg) over the corpse. Therefore, unfortunately, this entire episode (Act V, Scene 3) is deleted.

Act V, Scene 4 is a transitional scene that contains a brief meeting between Joe and Roy's ghost. Harper makes an appearance. The opera libretto omits this material.

Act V, Scene 5 takes place before the Council of the Continental Principalities as Prior returns his prophetic implements. He demands their blessing and seeks "more life." (P-133). Approximately two thirds of the lines from the original script are used in the libretto, although Mezei has greatly reordered and rearranged them in a cut and paste manner. This becomes the penultimate scene of the opera and is treated as a dramatic climax.

Perestroika Act V, Scene 6 (Prior, leaving Heaven, meets Rabbi Chemelwitz and Louis' grandmother, Sarah Ironson) is cut. This scene is usually not used in productions of the play. Scene 7 is also not used in the opera. This deletion removes Prior's return to Earth, a very funny Kushner riff on Dorothy's return to Kansas from *The Wizard of Oz*, plus the throwaway delivery by Prior of Blanche's iconic line from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," followed by Hannah's exit line, "Well, that's a stupid thing to do." (P-137).

Act V, Scene 8 (Joe and Harper: “I want your credit card”) is not used in the adaptation for the opera stage. The optional Scene 9 (Roy in Heaven, or Hell or Purgatory) is not used. And, finally, sadly, Scene 10 (Harper’s transcontinental flight soliloquy concerning San Francisco, the ozone layer, and the nature of human progress) is entirely eliminated.

The Epilogue to Kushner’s *Perestroika* occurs four years after the action of the remainder of the play. The audience sees Prior Walter as a relatively healthy survivor of the AIDS epidemic. He is joined by Louis and Belize – arguing as always over politics, philosophy and history – and a revitalized Hannah Pitt. “Hannah is noticeably different – she looks like a New Yorker and she is reading *The New York Times*.” (P-143). Prior delivers an anthem-like final speech.

By contrast, the final scene of the Eötvös/Mezei opera brings all the cast on stage and uses eight lines taken from Prior’s final speech, lines shared by all the principal characters. The opera ends with the repeated words “More Life,” used as a mantra, as individual cast members wave at the audience, saying “Bye, now.”

Chapter 6

“WE’RE HERE! WE’RE QUEER! GET OVER IT!” – Conclusions

Chapter 2 examined the script used for theatrical presentation of Tony Kushner’s monumental, two-part play *Angels in America*, in order to identify some of the author’s major themes, characters and ideas with a view to determining what, if any thing, was changed by adaptation of this material to other entertainment media. Chapter 3 examined the HBO Films production of *Angels in America* and compared/contrasted the treatment of some of Kushner’s themes and characters between the original and the screenplay adaptation. Chapter 4 continued this analytical process with detailed examination of the libretto prepared by Mari Mezei for the opera *Angels in America* composed by her husband, Péter Eötvös.

It was shown that, while theatre and film have very different modes and methods of imparting information and feelings, the film adaptation of *Angels in America* was remarkably faithful to the intent and content of the source material. The tone and language is more moderate in the film adaptation, but the bite, sarcasm and campiness come through clearly.

In Chapter 5 the analytical focus was narrowed to consider in some detail exactly what material the librettist felt necessary to omit from the opera for musical, literary or other reasons. Specifically, it was expected that this sharper focus would aid greatly in identifying in what ways and to what degree the

adaptation process had changed Kushner's original ideas, characters and message.

The opera differs markedly from the play and its film adaptation. Major areas of divergence include the following subject matter:

Politics

A major theme of the original *Angels in America* is politics. Kushner is very angry – and thinks that every one should be very angry – at the political process, at the Republican Party generally, at the Reagan administration particularly, and most specifically at the immoral, illegal and “I’ve-Got-Mine-and-Fuck-You” attitudes of the political manipulators, of whom Roy Cohn is the exemplar.

One hot laser beam of Kushner's fierce anger is pointed at President Reagan who is blamed for “inaction” and “indifference” in the initial phases of the HIV-disease outbreak in the 1980s. Additional anti-right wing barbs are tossed fairly frequently by Louis and Belize whose liberal-leanings are clearly defined by the author. Actually, Belize has contempt for politicians of all persuasions, right and left-wing. The political process has not done that much of benefit for himself or for his Black brothers and sisters. The opera libretto has deleted all political content.

Mozart/Da Ponte similarly sanitized *Figaro* of Beaumarchais' original “political” content, but they were seeking to counter the clear and present threat of official censorship. Perhaps they would have altered the play's focus, even without the prospect of official displeasure, for musical or literary reasons. The

only thing certain is that, in its final form, *The Marriage of Figaro* is a musical and literary masterpiece.

Religion

Angels in America is a play with the major plot point being that God has abandoned Heaven in order to better observe the fascinating, ever-changing, always moving human species. This is a play which begins its almost seven-hour presentation with a Rabbi conducting a Jewish funeral; which liberally doses its characters and its audience in Mormon sensibilities and principles; a play in which Prior's WASP-ish credentials are not flouted but which are always evident. In one of the most bizarre concepts to emerge in American theater in the last twenty years, secular Jew Louis Ironson is summoned to the hospital by Black gay nurse, Belize, in order to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, over the corpse of Roy Cohn, which Louis succeeds doing only with the help of the ghost of executed-1950s-era atomic spy, Ethel Rosenberg. Now, that takes imagination!

The Kaddish scene is entirely cut from the opera; the elements of religion that are retained are muted. In this version it is not Louis' belief that Mormonism is a reactionary, anti-homosexual belief system that will drive him and Joe Pitt apart. The opera takes on a quasi-nondenominational feel, with perhaps a Unitarian-like structure, and organized religion *per se* does not serve to move the operatic action forward.

Betrayal

The opera does concentrate on the primary relationships Prior/Louis and Joe/Harper and on the betrayals and disintegration that lead to their endings. Opera is usually quite good at examining feelings and Eötvös is successful, for the most part, in musically depicting the process of falling out of love. The libretto, however, is forced to compress much of the dialogue in the original script. As a result, most of the nuance and layering that makes Kushner's dialogue such a delight to hear or to read is muted or lost. However, the centrality of Louis' abandonment of Prior and of Joe's betrayal of Harper is not lost, and the unraveling status of these relationships serves as the engine that moves the rest of the action.

Pacing and Tempo

In the play and film versions, the characters are angry, terrified, lustful, conflicted, and confused, occasionally all at the same time. Contrariwise, the levels of passion and energy in the opera are turned way down. The opera, by comparison, seems much more languid and passive. Delivery of lines is much unavoidably slower when sung, rather than spoken. In the plays, each principal character cares deeply about something. Prior demands "more life" and an end to the AIDS epidemic; Roy cares about acquiring power and self-aggrandizement; Louis wants courage and authenticity as an American homosexual (and world peace, an end to hunger, justice, etc.); Belize wants to be left alone by the white power structure; Joe wants to live in a pristine past where existential questions

were never had to be answered. Hannah seeks a strong, stable family structure; Harper needs a man to give her love and a feeling of self-worth. And the Angels only want God to come home again.

Focus

I strongly believe that *Angels in America* is intended to be a true ensemble piece, with each of the eight principals being roughly equal in importance. Roy Cohn, played by an actor with the wattage of a Ron Liebman or Al Pacino, can and probably should steal every scene in which he appears, but in the theatre there is a balance of dramatic interest among all the characters. In the opera house, the focus shifts to a Harper/Prior-centric story line; Louis and Joe are thereby diminished in importance. Somewhere around the mid-point of Part 2, however, Harper and Joe drop out of sight and we never see or hear of them again.

Hannah and Belize are somewhat marginalized in the opera and much of Roy Cohn's best scenes and lines were omitted from the libretto text.

Interestingly, Eötvös and Mezei seem to have raised the significance of The Angel, both in terms of plot thrust and in terms of number of lines and amount of on-stage time.

It might appear that by mid-point of Part 2 the opera has to a large extent reduced our area of focus to only Prior and The Angel, everyone else relegated to substantially reduced status. This would reflect a common operatic structure and practice. *La bohème*, for example, might seem an "ensemble" piece, with several distinct and interesting characters, but clearly there is only one leading man and

one leading lady, Rudolfo and Mimi. In this respect, it is clear that play and opera audiences have differing expectations. And the types of elisions, deletions, and character alterations employed by Péter Eötvös/Mari Mezei in their adaptation of Kushner's play are the common tools used by adaptors since before the time of Peri's *Euridice*. And opera audiences love it that way!

The *Angels in America* opera treatment of Belize is a major departure from Kushner's original concept. In the plays, the nurse formerly known as Norman Arriaga (Belize) is out, proud, and does not give a damn who knows it. As played by Jeffrey Wright on stage and on film, Belize can swish and be "Queeny" and outrageously "over the top" as one of the most campy, effeminate individuals I have ever seen on an American stage. He can also be – and this is most important – assertive, in control, with a take-no-prisoners masculinity that makes him, finally, the strongest character in the play. In the opera, the role of Belize is sung by a countertenor who has been directed to play an essentially passive, effeminate, and relatively ineffectual supporting role. Further, the range and timbre of the countertenor voice is sometimes perceived by contemporary audiences to reinforce suggestions of effeminacy.

Homosexuality

The theatre version of *Angels in America*, and its television mini-series adaptation, presents five adult homosexual men (and friends and family) in New York City in the early stages of the HIV disease epidemic. The men have much in common, but they are also distinctly individual. Kushner invites the audience

to consider and, where possible, to identify with his homosexual characters as they interact with each other and their dramatic situation. Most audiences do find these characters to be sympathetic (with the probable exception of Roy Cohn) and can identify, at least in part, with their plight.

Unlike the play and film, however, the opera most definitely is not “Gay.” Despite Prior’s female dressing gown, wig and his applying of lipstick in the mutual dream/hallucination scene with Harper, there is very little of the flamboyant, hyper-“feminine” behavior often associated with the urban, openly homosexual sub-culture. All of Belize and Prior’s deployment of camp humor is omitted from the libretto, their bitchy, cutting (yet deeply affectionate) and always playful repartee is rendered as flat, lacking in color and imagination, and – frankly – quite dull. In my mind, dull is the one thing that the New York City gay sub-culture is not.

Audience Attitudes and Expectations

Putting on a play is relatively inexpensive in America, at least compared to making a film adaptation of that play or to mounting any production for a major national or regional opera company. For this reason, and many others, American opera audiences tend, generally, to be more conservative than theater and movie audiences. And managers of major opera companies are usually slow to support and endorse new, edgy or financially risky productions.

Despite the generalization above, a few contemporary operas have become very successful, artistically and financially, at least in the short term. However, it

is too soon to judge the lasting acceptance and popularity of, for example, John Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991).

The subject of homosexuality, as one example of an “edgy” material, has become common, even commonplace, in American theater since the 1960s. (See Appendix). In the last thirty years, gay themed movies have sailed into the multiplexes, and some have made a lot of money in ticket sales. In the last twenty years, homosexual men and lesbians have flooded the television channels, including major network, prime time gay characters. Opera lags behind in this area; some would say “holds the line” against social and political change.

Queer stories and characters can be found infrequently on the opera stage (e.g., Berg's *Lulu* (1937); Britten's *Billy Budd* (1951) and *Death in Venice* (1973)). An interesting contemporary exception is Paula M. Kimper's *Patience and Sarah* (1998). The libretto is by Wende Persons, based on the novel by Isabel Miller. As a chamber opera with accessible music and lyrics, this lesbian story of an early nineteenth-century “Boston marriage” has received several revivals to highly positive reviews since the premier production.

It remains clear that the opera going public, at least in America, strongly desires the standard repertory to be preserved and ventures into unfamiliar works and themes with great caution and modest expectations. Theater, movie and television audiences in America today, at least in urbanized areas, are much less hesitant to embrace newer ideas and values.

Fantasy

I always knew that Mr. Lies was an invention of Harper's addiction to Valium. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, on the other hand, was a character I immediately accepted as more real than not – with a little help from the “willing suspension of disbelief” – and certainly more than just a memory or figment of Roy's imagination. And, I never doubted the physical reality of all those angels. In the theater, scenes (and scene changes) move swiftly and the audience easily absorbs the rapidly developing story line, accepting angels, ladders climbing up to Heaven, nurses speaking in Hebrew, Mormon diorama mannequins that talk and walk about, and all of contents of Kushner's metatheatre bag of tricks. The opera does manage to retain quite a bit of the fantastical, and displays it to good effect for the most part. It is, however, difficult to produce a more fantastic effect than the angelic crashing through Prior's bedroom ceiling on stage at the end of *Millennium Approaches*.

Reality / Reverberations

The physical reality of one particular angel, at least, is beyond dispute. In New York City's Central Park at the Bethesda Terrace is a very large fountain, commonly known as the “Bethesda Fountain”. In the middle of the fountain's collecting bowl is a very large bronze statue of “The Angel of the Waters.” (See Figure 2).

Tony Kushner has forever associated this statue, this location, with his “Gay Fantasia on National Themes” by setting two scenes of *Perestroika* there



FIGURE 2: Bronze statue “Angel of the Waters,” 1868, by Emma Stebbins, installed 1873 at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, New York City. Photo by Dan4th Nicholas, 2007. Reprinted under Creative Commons Attribution License. See Appendix B.

(Act IV, Scene 3 and the Epilogue). Since 1994, my visits to New York City have always included a pilgrimage to the Bethesda Terrace in Central Park. This spot has become sacred to me, as an openly gay American; this “Angel of the Waters” has become a representation of my personal Guardian Angel, as well as a symbol of comfort and protection for all gay men and women in America. Believer, agnostic, Christian, Jew, Mormon, Muslim, or avowed atheist – and queer, straight, pansexual, or asexual – each may find rest, solace and vindication in the contemplation of what has become an *ad hoc* memorial to Gay Americans, living and dead, who were present during the historic times portrayed by Tony Kushner in his remarkable play, *Angels in America*.

In my lifetime as an American gay man, my sexuality has often seemed to be everyone else’s business except my own. American culture has gone from regarding homosexuality as the “love that dare not speak its name” in the 1940s and 1950s to “the love that wouldn’t shut up!” by the mid-1980s. The structures and constraints of “the closet” were strongly embedded in my adolescent psyche by my Roman Catholic upbringing and by my choice of a U. S. Navy career, complete with wife and three children. Finally, in 1979 at the age of 41, I “came out” of the Navy, out of the marriage, and out of the closet more or less simultaneously.

Since that time my former attitudes of distrust, paranoia, poor self-image and low self-esteem have all become more healthy and integrated into an authentic contemporary American gay persona. American culture has also

changed – I would say distinctly for the better – in regard to its attitude and treatment of its homosexual fellow citizens. Slowly and incrementally, feelings and beliefs and laws in America have been transformed in the direction of increased tolerance for diversity and equality of rights for all.

A major tipping point in this slow path out of American cultural adolescence regarding homosexual issues was the outbreak of the HIV epidemic, first recognized as such in 1982. The caring response of gay men and lesbians to the utter devastation visited by the virus on their community was a major eye opener to many outside that community. The apparent “lack of caring” response by the Reagan administration to the deaths of thousands of homosexuals, IV drug abusers, hemophiliacs, and blood transfusion recipients fueled an anger toward government and right-wing political figures and movements that persists to this day within the gay community. These are two of the pillars on which Tony Kushner erected the scaffolding of his play, *Angels in America*.

Despite its length, nearly seven hours, and its slightly dated point of view regarding the treatment of HIV/AIDS in the United States, *Angels in America* continues to be frequently staged here and abroad. This is a story of five queer men (and the women associated with them) in New York City in the early 1980s coping with the HIV virus, an often hostile environment, the problems of assimilation of religious minorities in the melting pot “where nothing melts,” and, most tellingly, the bewildering maze of issues to be traversed by these men in trying to establish their sexual identities and maintain intimate relationships.

These problems still seem remarkably contemporary.

Kushner unloaded a lot of issues from his fertile imagination into his script. The resultant “shock of recognition” that occurred when I first saw *Angels* performed is still vibrating inside my head. The most vivid emotional memory I have of that performance is an immense feeling of pride and wholeness that I felt as a gay American. At the conclusion of the performance, I experienced a sense of validation and belonging, perhaps for the first time, while crying hot tears of joy and anger, grief and resolution while loudly, proudly joining the enthusiastic standing ovation.

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APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT GAY-THEMED PLAYS (1953-2010)

- 1953 – *Tea and Sympathy*, Robert Anderson
1964 – *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, Joe Orton (British)
1965 – *Loot*, Joe Orton (British)
1967 – *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, John Herbert (Canadian)
1968 – *Boys in the Band*, Mart Crowley
1969 – *What the Butler Saw*, Joe Orton (British)
1973 – *Hot l Baltimore*, Lanford Wilson
1975 – *P.S., Your Cat Is Dead*, James Kirkwood, Jr.
1977 – *The Shadow Box*, Michael Cristofer
1978 – *The 5th of July*, Lanford Wilson
1978 – *Torch Song Trilogy*, Harvey Fierstein
1979 – *Bent*, Martin Sherman
1985 – *As Is*, William Hoffman
1985 – *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer
1987 – *On Tidy Endings*, Harvey Fierstein
1989 – *The Lisbon Traviata*, Terrence McNally
1991 – *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, Terrence McNally
1992 – *The Baltimore Waltz*, Paula Vogel
1993 – *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches*, Tony Kushner
1993 – *Angels in America, Part II: Perestroika*, Tony Kushner
1993 – *Jeffrey*, Paul Rudnick
1993 – *Twilight of the Golds*, Jonathan Tolins
1993 – *The Destiny of Me*, Larry Kramer
1994 – *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, Terrence McNally
1998 – *Corpus Christi*, Terrence McNally
2002 – *The Laramie Project*, Moises Kaufman
2002 – *Take Me Out*, Richard Greenberg
2009 – *Loaded*, Elliot Ramon Potts
2010 – *My Big Gay Italian Wedding*, Anthony J. Wilkinson
2010 – *Angels in America* (New York Revival), Tony Kushner

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION DOCUMENTATION FOR USE OF PHOTOGRAPH

(FIGURE 2)

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