

Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches Dramaturgy Note
Penn State Centre Stage, 2020

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Penn State Centre Stage's production of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* marks 30 years since the piece was first commissioned by the Eureka Theatre. In those 30 years, we have seen five administration changes, three decades, and one new millennium.

Angels in America was commissioned by Eureka Theatre in 1990 by co-artistic directors Oskar Eustis and Tony Taccone. After attending a 1985 performance of Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*, the producers saw great potential in the then unknown Kushner. *Millennium Approaches*, part one of the play, premiered in May 1991 at Eureka. A production directed by Declan Donnellan played the National Theatre in 1992, starring a young Daniel Craig as Joe Pitt.

Millennium Approaches opened on May 4th, 1993 at the Walter Kerr Theatre in a new production directed by George C. Wolfe. Part Two of *Angels in America*, titled *Perestroika*, joined *Millennium* in repertory on November 23 of the same year. Public reception was unanimous: Tony Kushner had written "the most thrilling American play in years" (Rich). *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* were awarded the 1993 and 1994 Tony Awards, for Best Play respectively. Both parts each additionally received their respective year's Pulitzer Prize Award for Drama.

Kushner continued to make revisions to *Millennium Approaches*, and even more extensive revisions to *Perestroika* in the years following their Broadway runs. A 2003 HBO miniseries (adapted for the screen by Kushner) featured big names such as Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. In 2017, *Angels in America* returned to London in a new production at the National Theatre starring Andrew Garfield and Nathan Lane. The production, directed by Marianne Elliot, transferred to Broadway for a limited engagement at the Neil Simon Theatre in 2018; this production won the 2018 Tony Award for Best Revival, scoring additional awards for Andrew Garfield (Best Actor in a Play) and Nathan Lane (Best Featured Actor in a Play).

A NOTE FROM THE DRAMATURG

"History is about to crack wide open" – Ethel Rosenberg, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*

In his review of the original Broadway production, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich argued that it was the 1992 Presidential Election that "had affected [*Angels*] the most." To a country still feeling the effects of the Reagan Revolution, *Angels in America* may have felt like "a call to arms against the reigning regimes that tended to award the Roy Cohns and ignore the Prior Walters." After the election of President Clinton, there was a definitive shift in the perception of *Angels*: to his audiences, Kushner seemed to be focusing more on "what happens next than on the past."

However, one must not be so quick to forget the past and move forward.

In the 1950s, as the Red Scare ravaged through Washington, D.C. and the House Committee on Un-American Activities conducted its trials, a parallel act of terror was occurring: the Lavender Scare. Senator Joseph McCarthy fed lies that Soviet communists were blackmailing homosexual men working in the U.S. government into giving out government secrets in exchange for keeping their sexual orientations a secret. McCarthy's efforts led to hundreds of firings of homosexual men in the U.S. government and prompted President Eisenhower to issue Executive Order 10450, which banned homosexuals from working in the federal government. It wasn't until 1995 when President Clinton rescinded the order, putting in place the

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for admittance of homosexuals in the military (that specific policy was then rescinded on September 20, 2011). History began to once again repeat itself when, on July 26, 2017, President Trump announced a ban on transgender people serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

The through line that connects these attacks on the LGBTQ+ community and the American people is Roy M. Cohn.

Serving as Joseph McCarthy’s aide in the 1950s, attorney Roy Cohn was present for the trials that ruined hundreds of lives under false pretenses in the name of protecting democracy. Cohn was instrumental in the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, two American citizens tried, convicted, and executed by the U.S. government for spying on behalf of the Soviet Union (they were the only two Americans to be executed by the U.S. government during the Cold War era). At a New York party in 1973, Roy Cohn was approached by a young Donald J. Trump. Trump was being sued by the U.S. government for racist housing practices and was advised to seek out Cohn for legal advice.

It was in 1984 when reality finally caught up to the immortal Roy Cohn.

In 1984, Roy Cohn was diagnosed with AIDS. He died two years later in 1986 at the age of 59. Speculation about his sexuality had long since been a topic of discussion. Political consultant Roger Stone—colleague of Roy Cohn and advisor for Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, now convicted felon—stated that “Roy [Cohn] was not gay [...] he was a man who liked having sex with men [...] gays were weak and effeminate [...] he always seemed to have these young blonde boys around [...] it just wasn’t discussed [...] he was interested in power and access.”

When *Angels in America* premiered on Broadway in 1993, the country was in the midst of an administration change. Penn State Centre Stage’s 2020 production of *Angels* comes at the beginning of yet another election cycle. In 1993, Rich advised that “it is really history that Mr. Kushner intends to crack open [...]”. While the characters in *Millennium Approaches* look forward to the year 2000 with great uncertainty, that same feeling courses through our country at this very moment as we look forward to November.

Kushner writes to warn society, ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. *Angels* is about a very specific moment in our nation’s history that cannot be forgotten; 1985—a country in the midst of the AIDS crisis, a time of fear and great uncertainty where an entire generation of young men was lost and half of the country looked the other way. We cannot focus on what happens next if we choose not to acknowledge our past.

As with any great American classic, the sign of relevance to a society at any point in history is a clear indicator of the piece’s timelessness. In 1993, Rich wrote that *Angels in America* reaches “deep into the audience’s heart to ask just who we are and what we intend this country to become.” We invite you to ask yourself that same question tonight as the Great Work begins.

Frederick D. Miller, Dramaturg
B.A. Theatre Studies ‘22

Sources:

Rich, Frank. “Embracing All Possibilities in Art and Life.” *The New York Times*. 1993.