



Angels in America: A Moment in History

September 3, 2016

Matt Bowdren

“There are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political.”

—Louis in Tony Kushner’s
Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches



Tony Kushner (born in 1956) received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993 for *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. He co-authored with Eric Roth the screenplay for the 2005 film *Munich*, and he wrote the screenplay for the 2012 film *Lincoln*—both received Academy Award nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Kushner’s parents were musicians and his family is Jewish, descended from immigrants from Russia/Poland. Shortly after his birth, Kushner’s parents moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana. In 1974, Kushner moved to New York to begin his undergraduate college education at Columbia University, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Medieval Studies in 1978. He attended the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, graduating in 1984.

Kushner’s best known work is *Angels in America* (a play in two parts: *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*), a seven-hour epic about the AIDS epidemic in Reagan-era New York, which was later adapted into an HBO miniseries for which Kushner wrote the screenplay. His other plays include *Hydriotaphia*, *Slavs!; Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, *A Bright Room Called Day*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and the book for the musical *Caroline, or Change*. Kushner has translated Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* and has also adapted Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Corneille’s *The Illusion*, and S. Ansky’s play *The Dybbuk*.

Angels in America is an epic drama, its plot unfolding over great distances of time and place, involving many characters, and more than one story line. Two complete plays form the entire plot: the first part, *Millennium Approaches* and its second installment, *Perestroika*. Together, they present more than thirty characters in eight acts, fifty-nine scenes, and an epilogue.

Kushner subtitled his play “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.” Like a fantasia (a medley of familiar tunes with variations and interludes), the play’s scenes often seem musical, like operatic arias, playful duets, or powerful trios. Characters move in and out of conversations with each other, sometimes even overlapping other vignettes, which occur onstage at the same time, and the settings change rapidly from offices to bedrooms, from hospital wards to the imaginary South Pole.

For all its intricacies, the plot of the play is quite simple. It is the story of two couples whose relationships are disintegrating, set in America in the 1980s against a backdrop of greed, conservatism, sexual politics, and the discovery of an awful new disease: AIDS. It is this backdrop that provides *Angels in America* its magnitude and sets it apart from other love stories. In this play, the plot is largely driven by its themes, which are viewed from different characters’ perspectives, as through a kaleidoscope, as the story unfolds.