

Etudes: an online theatre & performance
studies journal for emerging scholars

Stone Angels: Painful Progress After the Millennium

By Catherine Heiner

Abstract

With the recent revival and commercial success of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, we gain a new opportunity to examine and question our cultural history. As we move further from the era in which the play takes place, the ability to historicize the action becomes more stable and the narrative crystallizes within its context. However, categorizing *Angels in America* as an historical artifact to be analyzed also inhibits further development regarding our relationship with the past. Rather than tightly binding the play to the historical moment it depicts, perhaps an alternative approach lies in exploring the ideology it portrays, and using its structure to understand the cultural relationship between the contemporary moment and its interaction with the nearness of this history. This paper questions how historicism and formalism can interact with the structure and creation of *Angels* to produce relevant contemporary understanding for both audiences and practitioners as we imagine history, ideology, utopia, loss, and community.

Etudes Vol. 4 No. 1

December 2018

ISSN 2375-0758

www.etudesonline.com

Stone Angels: Painful Progress After the Millennium

By Catherine Heiner

In the final scenes of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, the characters wander through Central Park arguing about the nature of progress. As they muse over the subject of politics, Hannah asserts that "You can't live in a world without an idea of the world, but it's living that makes the ideas. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to make a theory" (144). The tension she illustrates highlights the connection between living and progress. In order to develop theories to understand the nature of humanity, one must also be willing to live and participate within the world they examine, always following the give and take between experience and theory. As a complete narrative, *Angels in America* exists in this same site of tension. Over the course of two plays broken down into eight acts and staged over approximately seven hours, *Angels in America* follows the lives of seven individuals at the height of the AIDS crisis. The specificity of time, place, and subject matter ties *Angels* to a precise moment in American history—fall of 1985 to February 1990 in New York City—but the scope of the narrative extends deeper into overarching conversations on politics, religion, identity, and community, broadening the play to include all that the subtitle of *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* suggests.

The further we move away from *Angels*, the more enticing it becomes to examine it only as a historical object in order to trace our own political lineage back through to the present. Even now, as the 2018 Broadway transfer of *Angels in America* becomes the most Tony Award-nominated production of a play (McPhee), *Angels* requires us to question how we perceive and understand our own history. How do we imagine the approaching millennium through an era that may feel like distant past?

In truth, we are not as far removed from the events of *Angels* as we may feel. Analyzing *Angels* as a predominantly historical artifact leaves little room to understand how we still feel the consequences of that era in our contemporary moment. Choosing instead to focus on the structure and form of the play lends itself to a formalist perspective, which focuses on a “scientific, or precise and systematic” approach of close reading the text independently of historical context (Ransom n.p.). However, the structure of *Angels* even as an autonomous text requires a foundation in the historical moment, resulting in a tension between its cultural context and the play itself. Rather than attempting to separate the play from its context, formalist approaches may be adapted to explore the tension that *Angels* presents—between past and present, literal and imagined, mobile and concrete. This tension could be further developed by employing a formalist perspective, which examines the meaning of the text as discoverable within the text itself. However, the text of *Angels* is so dominated by its context and history that this analysis must move away from normative formalism in which the critical agency of art is only capable when it is “restored to [its] original, compositional complexity” (Levinson 560), and toward a more activist formalist view, where its agency can be found when the art is “released from the closures they have suffered through a combination of their own idealizing impulses, their official receptions, and general processes of cultural absorption” (Levinson 560). *Angels* continues to exist in a site of tension, where it must be released from its history while directly engaging in the world of its creation. From here, the play also leads to the additional question: what might the form and structure of *Angels*—which is firmly rooted in the realities of corrupt politics and broken healthcare but also includes ghosts, angels, trips to Antarctica, and a Heaven that looks eerily similar to San Francisco—tell us about how we envision this past?

In many ways, *Angels in America* comes to audiences not quite “always-already read” as Jameson reports, but instead closer to “always-already experienced.” Part one, titled *Millennium Approaches*, had its first reading at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1988, but did not receive a staged production until three years later in 1991. Similarly, its counterpart *Perestroika* only received a staged workshop in 1991, and it wasn’t until 1992 that both parts received fully staged productions (Román 51). The action of the play, which begins in October 1985 in *Millennium Approaches* and concludes in February 1990 in *Perestroika*, had already passed into the annals of history. *Angels* was also not the first play to dramatize the events of this era, as Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and William F. Hoffman’s *As Is* had also recently been staged. In spite of the saturation of theatre dealing with AIDS, part of what made *Angels* unique was the sheer enormity of the production. One critic described attending the “marathon production” with “about the same enthusiasm as I felt for an ongoing root canal operation, expecting something painful and boring but nonetheless unavoidable” (Hornby 189). Kushner later termed this new genre the “Theatre of the Fabulous,” which included the two-part form, along with “the complexity of its narrative structure; in its mixing of everyday experience with the stuff of dreams and fantasy, its interruption of the realistic mode by the ‘angelic’ and the metadramatic; in its commingling of dialogue with monologue, diatribe, poetic and vatic voices” (Geis and Kruger 2-3). While Theatre of the Fabulous lacks the same recognition as theatre of the absurd or theatre of the oppressed, *Angels* certainly set an expected structure for plays dealing with LGBTQ+ issues that lives in the site of tension. In 2018, the Young Vic theatre in London produced *The Inheritance* by Matthew Lopez. Based on the novel *Howards End* by E.M. Forster, *The Inheritance* asks what it’s like to be a young gay man in New York a generation after the AIDS crisis. Much in the same style as *Angels*,

The Inheritance is performed in two parts, each running approximately three hours and fifteen minutes. It remains to be seen if invoking the form of Theatre of the Fabulous still has resonance with contemporary audiences.

The popular reception and immense success *Angels* faced lends itself to questioning how it achieved this magnitude. In their introduction to a collection of essays based on the play, Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger ask “why, among all the plays, novels, and poems written out of the current moment of gay and lesbian activism, and out of the experience of the AIDS crisis, has Kushner’s work particularly struck a chord of response? Does the imminent ‘canonization’ of the play necessarily imply a diminishing of its potential as a call for political activism?” (3). Perhaps the answer to this lies in how *Angels* approached not just the AIDS crisis but deeper questions of culture and national identity. Playwright Tony Kushner explained at the time of its initial success in 1993 that “it’s about a decade and a Zeitgeist which you just can’t discuss without discussing the plague. So it’s not a melodrama, like *The Normal Heart*, which I greatly admired, or a rant like *As Is*, which I greatly didn’t. It’s a meditation” (qtd. in Hitchens). As a meditation, *Angels* does more than lock its narrative within a strictly confined historical framework. Instead, it moves from being “a cry of pain or outrage” wrapped up within AIDS to “a huge diorama onto which to project American discontents” (Hitchens). By approaching the AIDS crisis in this way, Kushner further demonstrates the tensions between the structure and form of *Angels* and its history. A normative formalist perspective cannot account for the history built into the structure, therefore requiring an activist formalist approach.

One particularly persistent historical figure in the play is Roy Cohn, who is central to the narrative as both homophobic antagonist and political public figure, and who looms particularly large within

contemporary productions. In 2014, original *Angels* producer Gordon Davidson pointed out that only now can we begin to investigate the 1980s and Reaganism, given that “you have to look back if you want to be contemporary” (qtd. in Hitchens). As Meredith McDonough who recently directed both parts at the Actor’s Theatre in Louisville pointed out, “you can’t ignore it...Roy Cohn’s living legacy is running the country” (qtd. in Keel). Even early on after *Angels* took the theatre world by storm critics and audiences recognized Kushner’s ability to push history further away in order to more critically examine it. In 1993 one critic stated how rare it was to “capture the essence of a period so recent, but Kushner makes its hypocrisies seem bizarre and distant, as pious statements about family values and free enterprise justify graft, corruption, greed, callousness, and social decay” (Hornby 189). The ability to develop a greater schism between present day and the events of the day may have proved a benefit when *Angels* first opened, but currently challenges directors to balance between pushing the play too far back to seem relevant to contemporary audiences at all. References to progress, moving forward, or Ethel Rosenberg’s warning that “history is about to crack wide open” (118) become moments of apprehension, as “the contemporary audience may knowingly dissent” (Canning 44). As part of their 2010-2011 season, the Signature Theatre Company mounted the first major professional production of *Angels* in New York since its debut. Performed precisely twenty years after the original New York production, one critic addressed that “Signature’s production can’t escape the quality of being a retrospective, allowing us to place the progress of the past 20 years on trial” (Chambers-Letson 147). He goes on to question “How do we reconcile the heartbreak of our present disappointment with Prior’s insistence on hope and More Life?” (Chambers-Letson 147). While this question relates directly to the 2011 production, it can be certain that our

current political administration still leaves us vulnerable to something that could be described as “present disappointment.” The moment of *Angels* has passed, but we still feel the consequences that its world produced. In recognizing these consequences, *Angels* resists the autonomy of a normative formalist approach, but cannot point us in a distinct direction of progress. When attached only to the historical framework of the plague, a desire for “More Life” runs the risk of appearing campy, dated, and trite. However, just as the play navigates the tension between historical specificity and broad national ideas, *Angels* has the capability to generate positive and uplifting effect for audiences.

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin argues that articulating the past historically means “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). In the case of *Angels*, this moment of danger could be articulated within the moment of the AIDS crisis itself. The term “AIDS” was not adopted by the Centers for Disease Control until 1982, but the viruses and infections had debilitated and killed many individuals before this official designation, and artists were developing work that responded to this crisis as early as 1983 (Román 47-48). Efforts to reconstruct a history of AIDS theatre then becomes “improbable,” particularly because “many of the early playwrights and performers whose work dealt in one form or another with AIDS are now dead, and that so many of the artistic collaborators, producers, theatre staff, and spectators who participated in these productions and performances are also dead, and therefore may leave no record of the events” (Román 50). *Angels*, then, exists as a residual fragment of this past—containing the elements of memory that could be seized. Additionally, the issue of ephemerality is not limited to theatre associated with the AIDS crisis. Theatre uses live performance and embodied narratives, which by nature make these stories transient and immediate,

but difficult to capture. Using theatre to explore the consequences of AIDS at an individual human level further emphasizes the magnitude of loss within both the artistic and queer communities in this era. *Angels* has the ability to make this loss more potent—in the same way that the performance may never be enacted the same way again, the people and stories that were lost to the plague will similarly never be recovered. The performance becomes paradoxical—embodying these characters with the purpose of pointing to their absence. Historicizing *Angels* then moves from simply developing context and “seiz[ing] hold” of the memory in the way Benjamin describes to acknowledging the moments of danger that precipitate the act of remembering the loss and absence in the present.

In order to historicize *Angels*, investigation we must reach beyond the scope of the AIDS crisis and toward the concept of the play fulfilling its secondary title of *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Prior’s final act of blessing the audience with “More Life” invites a deeper comprehension of what a more hopeful life would look like moving forward. In this way, the final moments of *Angels* become utopian performatives, or “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present” (Dolan 5). *Angels* does not give a prescriptive answer to what “More Life” precisely looks like, and leaves the characters facing the uncertainty of what lies ahead. Prior, even in his prophetic role, only notes that “The world only spins forward...The time has come” (146). Similarly, in her final speech Harper signals towards hope, as she considers “Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead” (142). Both of these conclusions illustrate a “fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection,” but instead a utopia “always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us” (Dolan 6). The concept of utopia as

portrayed in *Angels* cannot be fully realized without also addressing the moments between its origin and the present. Not only does this include an isolated investigation into the historical window the play performs, but the relationship between its form and the contemporary moment. *Angels* thus provides engagement with a sense of history on all levels, including the past (1980s-era America), present (contemporary productions), and future (themes of progress and dreaming ahead). Embodying the narrative in this way, *Angels* asks practitioners and audiences to address the connections between past and future, and the tension of connecting them through the present.

By the end of the play, Harper and Prior share a bond based in their shared experiences of fever dreams and hallucinations. Within the narrative these visions “seem, superficially, to be the products of the unraveling of their minds, they make sense when acknowledged as the expressions of structures of feeling inverse to the dominant discourse of ability and normalcy” (Bytsebier 299). The utopia imagined within *Angels* is then articulated through the characters uncertain of survival. Much like the specter of AIDS and the ephemerality of theatre performance, the imagined possibility of utopia exists at the center of *Angels*. While we are capable of learning from the historical narratives of our past, our constant movement towards the future makes it impossible to go anywhere but forward.

In the nearly thirty years since its first performances, perhaps the most iconic image of Kushner’s play is the Angel. Crashing through Prior’s ceiling in the last scene of *Millennium Approaches*, the Angel personifies the spiritual and transcendent themes present throughout the play. Some critics point to Kushner’s Angel as an imagining of Benjamin’s Angel, described as “looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating...But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has

got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (257-58). Just as Harper and Prior move through the painful progress of time, Benjamin’s Angel is pushed toward a future he can neither see nor disrupt. Kushner imagines this Angel one step further—not only are the Angels resistant to the push of the future, they insist that the loss of God is due to humanity’s progression. The Angels only see one possible solution to get God to return, and as the Angel furiously explains to Prior: “YOU MUST STOP MOVING!” (44). In this light, the crisis of the Angels and the struggle of the historicist appear startlingly familiar. In both cases, it is the difficulty of returning to that which cannot be revisited, and examining that which does not remain constant. The autonomy assumed in normative formalism desires a constancy in creating meaning, however it is only through the release from closure of activist formalism that *Angels* can honor its history and present. As the danger of AIDS decreased following the initial *Angels* opening, the ability to push the context of the play further into the past becomes much easier. However, regardless of revivals and subsequent mountings, the forward passage of time remains constant. It is the question of movement and progression towards a future we do not know and can only partially grasp that becomes the foundation for emotional catharsis in *Angels*.

The play itself imagines a small step toward the future in *Perestroika*’s epilogue. Prior has been living with AIDS for five years, and four of the major characters observe the angelic fountain in Central Park. Prior takes this opportunity to communicate directly with the audience, starting with an explanation of the sculpture, “She’s my favorite angel. I like them best when they’re statuary. They commemorate death but they suggest a world without dying. They are made of the heaviest things on earth, stone and iron, they weigh tons but they’re winged, they are

engines and instruments of flight” (145). The contradiction of the stone angel embodies the contradiction of the play as a whole—somehow acting as memorial and monument to death while presenting the possibility of utopia and progress in the future. To imagine *Angels* in a historical context is to imagine ourselves as somehow linked to this specific past of pain, disease, relationships, and hope regardless of our own personal histories. *Angels* may be rooted in the specifics of the AIDS crisis, but the dynamic pull between life/death, conservative/liberal, spiritual/religious, and masculine/feminine gives us a space to examine our national identity. In reviewing the 2011 Signature Theatre production, one critic addressed that the point of *Angels* is that “the play, like the march of history, must leave us unsatisfied and longing for more; it must remind us of the work that remains to be done” (Chambers-Letson 148). It is the very human behavior of desiring progress and hoping for a future that the Angel resists so fully within the narrative. We must imagine our history in a similarly complex manner—we cannot change our past, but it informs how we may continue forward. The Great Work Begins.

WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-264.
- Bytтеbier, Stephanie. "'It Doesn't Count If It's Easy': Facing Pain, Mediating Identity in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*." *Modern Drama*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 287-309.
- Canning, Richard. "The Great Work Continues!" *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 44-45.
- Chambers-Letson, Joshua Takano. "The Principle of Hope: Reflections on a Revival of *Angels in America*." *TDR*, vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 142-149.
- Dolan, Jill. "Introduction: Feeling the Potential of Elsewhere." *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, pp. 1-34.
- Geis, Deborah R. and Steven F. Kruger. "Introduction." *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 1-10
- Hitchens, Christopher. "Angels Over Broadway." *Vanity Fair*. March 1993, pp. 72-76. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/1993/03/christopher-hitchens-on-angels-in-america>

- Hornby, Richard. "Dramatizing AIDS." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1993, pp. 189-194. JSTOR.
- Keel, Eli. "'The Great Work' Continues: Talking About *Angels in America* 25 Years Later." *Leo Weekly*. 29 September 2017.
<https://www.leoweekly.com/2017/09/great-work-continues-talking-angels-america-25-years-later/>
- Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America: Part One: Millennium Approaches*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992.
- . *Angels in America: Part Two: Perestroika*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992.
- Levinson, Marjorie. "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA*, vol. 122, no. 2, pp. 558-569.
- McPhee, Ryan. "*Angels in America* Extends Broadway Run After Record-Breaking 11 Tony Nominations." *Playbill.com*, 2 May 2018.
<http://www.playbill.com/article/angels-in-america-extends-broadway-run-after-record-breaking-11-tony-nominations>
- Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism, Inc." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, np.
- Román, David. "November 1, 1992: AIDS/*Angels in America*." *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 40-55.

Savran, David. "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation." *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 13- 39.