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## SUNDAY VIEW; 'Angels' Finds A Poignant Note of Hope

By DAVID RICHARDS

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Anyone who's been fearful of a letdown can set fear aside. The virtues that Mr. Kushner demonstrated in the initial installment ("Millennium Approaches") -- an intrepid theatricality, stinging intelligence and an engaging proclivity for undercutting himself with humor -- remain intact. What's more, they are thrown into high relief by the sadness that permeates "Perestroika." The two parts are now alternating at the Walter Kerr Theater, and if you've seen neither, my advice would be to see them as close together as possible.

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Without caving in to sentimentality or altering what has always been a sober prognosis for the future, the playwright has been able to find hope in his chronicle of the poisonous 1980's -- something I wouldn't have thought likely after the first part. It may amount to no more than the acknowledgment that we are all in this grim mess together. But the uplift is real and salutary. Mr. Kushner even extends his charity to the work's archfiend, the lawyer Roy Cohn.

In many ways, the characters are worse off in "Perestroika" than before. Cohn (Ron Leibman), ravaged by AIDS and about to be disbarred, writhes on a hospital bed. Prior Walter (Stephen Spinella), also ill with AIDS, is holding on physically but his spirit is wracked. The two relationships that were falling apart in the course of "Millennium Approaches" -- Prior's affair with Louis and Joe's marriage to the Valium-addicted Harper -- are not going to be repaired. And the Angel who came crashing through Prior's bedroom ceiling at the climax of Part 1 has not brought glad tidings with her.

It turns out that God, fed up with human ity's restless need for change, checked out of Heaven and hasn't been seen since April 18, 1906 -- the date of the San Francisco earthquake. No salvation can be expected from above. The characters will have to chart their own path out of the chaos of the times and the wreckage of their personal lives. If their shrill grievances dominated Part 1, their helplessness and their vulnerabilities are what stand out in Part 2.

"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," trills Prior, who has never been above the

flourishes of high camp. "Well that's a stupid thing to do," snaps Hannah Pitt (Kathleen Chalfant), the stoic Mormon who has become his friend. The exchange is more than a joke. If we're going to mend society, Mr. Kushner suggests, kindness among strangers is the starting point, but it has to be wedded to a certain raw grit.

Still, stern Hannah Pitt a friend of flamboyant Prior Walter? Who'd have thought so at the end of "Millennium," when Hannah had barely arrived in New York City none too happy with her own son's admission that he was a homosexual. "This is my ex-lover's lover's Mormon mother," explains Prior, introducing the plain woman to one of his nurses, who has to admit that the connection is pretty unusual, "even in New York in the 80's."

Unusual encounters, however, lie at the core of "Angels in America." Much has been said of Mr. Kushner's audacious dramaturgy, which freely mixes realistic scenes with fantasy. Characters wander in and out of each other's dreams and hallucinations, and in one of "Perestroika's" wilder imaginings, replace the plaster mannequins in a three-dimensional diorama depicting the Mormons' westward trek in the 19th century. Prior can't shake that badgering Angel (Ellen McLaughlin, somersaulting in midair), while Cohn continues to be shadowed by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg (Ms. Chalfant), clutching her pocketbook to her breast, nurturing an acid-green hatred of the man who helped send her to the electric chair, and waiting patiently for the day he'll croak.

Daring is only part of it, though. More important, Mr. Kushner creates believable ties among these decidedly odd bedfellows. Take the aftermath of Cohn's death, a scene that, in the opinion of Louis (Joe Mantello), is "too weird for words." Belize, a black drag queen and Cohn's nurse, has brought Louis to the hospital room to help him spirit away Cohn's private stock of AZT. Both of them abominate the dead man, but Belize doesn't want to leave it at that.

Turning to Louis, a left-wing Jew, he orders him to say Kaddish over Cohn's body. Although understandably flabbergasted by the request, Louis puts a Kleenex on his head and starts to mumble the prayer until his memory fails. Out of the shadows comes a flat steady voice to prompt him. It is that of Ethel Rosenberg, still on her vigil, still clutching her pocketbook, but willing to help the necessary process of forgiveness along.

By any rational yardstick, the scene shouldn't work -- the elements are too bizarre, the situation too preposterous -- and yet it is hypnotically moving. Time and again, the playwright ventures out on a limb, then reaches back and pulls the audience out with him. If on one level "Perestroika" can be described as a vast soap opera populated by jilted lovers and filled with steamy sex, then it must be added that an angel is one of the ravishers and a jilted lover can gnaw down a spruce tree with her teeth. Always, there's Mr. Kushner's uncommon imagination to reckon with.

He has titled the last of the evening's five acts (plus epilogue) "Heaven, I'm in Heaven." Indeed, Prior gets there by climbing up a yellow ladder and pushing aside a manhole cover. But it proves to be a dull place for frozen souls. He will opt for earth's hard flux instead. "Even sick," he reasons, "I want to be alive." In Mr. Spinella's gallantly open performance, this frail, sometimes foolish and often frightened creature emerges as a genuine hero.

I don't know if it's the more generous tone of "Perestroika" that's responsible for my impression, but just about everyone -- from the cast members to the director George C. Wolfe -- seems more comfortable with the material this time. The various plot strands swirl together, part and reconnect as naturally as currents in a river. (Robin Wagner's scenery and Jules Fisher's lighting flow together just as smoothly.) The hard assertiveness of "Millennium" has been tempered with no loss in overall power.

While Mr. Leibman's explosive portrayal of Cohn approaches scenery-chewing, I guess the ranting can be accepted as the last titanic gasp of an impotent giant. And with darkness closing in on him, the character no longer upstages the others as baldly as he did. They benefit considerably from the increased breathing room. Belize, especially, a secondary figure in Part 1, moves directly to the foreground. Wry,

skeptical, independent -- he is very much his own person, and Jeffrey Wright plays him with wonderful subtlety. Clearer than ever are the warmth under the wryness and the wisdom behind the skeptical gaze.

Ms. Chalfant again handles a variety of odd character roles with telling restraint -- among them the world's oldest living Bolshevik, a counterpart to the ancient rabbi she portrayed in Part 1. The deftest of her accomplishments, though, is how she humanizes Hannah Pitt, endowing her with more humor and understanding than the woman's severe demeanor would seem to indicate. As Louis, Mr. Mantello has not shaken off his heavy burden of guilt for having deserted Prior in "Millennium," but some of his puppy-dog charm has started to shine through. The character is growing up, true, but the actor is also shading the part more expertly.

In fact, the only one shut out in the cold is David Marshall Grant. As Joe Pitt, he's never had an easy time reconciling a strict Mormon upbringing, marriage to the pill-popping Harper and an equivocal father-son relationship with the demonic Cohn. (No wonder the actor appeared confused in "Millennium.") In "Perestroika," he comes out of the closet and has an affair with Louis, who eventually rejects him. But then, Mr. Kushner doesn't appear to like Joe very much either. Punished (presumably for his Republican sins) and stripped of his self-esteem, the character is left to flounder, and Mr. Grant along with him.

MR. KUSHNER IS definitely nicer to Harper (Marcia Gay Harden), who, after all her exotic hallucinations, is finally granted a magnificent vision. In a plane to San Francisco, she dreams she is on the other side of the ozone layer, just where it is torn and ragged. Peering through, she sees the souls of the dead -- victims of war, famine and plague -- rising up "like sky divers in reverse." Hands joined, ankles linked, they form a great web that seals over the life-threatening hole. Ms. Harden keeps her delivery simple, and the astonishing imagery takes your breath away.

Mankind will save itself. Or no one will. That is the daunting reality of Mr. Kushner's huge drama and also its humane promise. The choice is ours. "The great work begins," says Prior as the curtain falls. He's looking right at us. 'Laughter on the 23d Floor'

Neil Simon calls it "Laughter on the 23d Floor." But for his 29th Broadway show, a mad memoir of his formative years in New York as a television comedy writer, "Pandemonium on the 23d Floor" would have served just as well.

Recollecting what it was like to be part of the team that turned out weekly scripts in the early 1950's for Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" and "Caesar's Hour," Mr. Simon remembers primarily the insanity, the mind-boggling cascade of jokes and the fury, real and simulated, that kept the writers' room -- an off-white aerie overlooking 57th Street -- in a constant state of turmoil.

In the process, he has come up with what could be the most maniacal comedy of his career, one that allows Nathan Lane, playing a Caesar act-alike by the name of Max Prince, a golden opportunity to go berserk for two hours. Mr. Lane does not waste it. Not that anyone is trying for an instant to calm the man down. Max has no fewer than seven writers on his staff, modeled after such zanies as Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, whose livelihood depends on firing him up and keeping him productively demented.

In "Laughter on the 23d Floor" (at the Richard Rodgers Theater), all hell breaks loose and breaks loose and breaks loose. This poses the obvious problem of how Mr. Simon, his enterprising cast and the director Jerry Zaks are going to top themselves. The not-entirely satisfactory solution has been to turn up the volume, magnify the gestures and come back with more of the same. On occasion, the madness attains surrealistic proportions -- rather like the Abbott and Costello routine "Who's on first?" raised to the power of seven. On other occasions, it is vaguely fatiguing -- the way a surprise party can be when everyone is trying to prevent the hilarity from dying down.

The theatergoer who looks to Mr. Simon chiefly for rapid-fire quips, of course, need look no further. Rarely have they come more rapidly. Like the old vaudevillians in his 1972 hit, "The Sunshine Boys,"

Max Prince's writers think and breathe comedy. Bouncing jokes off one another is how they brainstorm, so even outright clinkers have a utilitarian value. Nobody is afraid of sounding stupid. The shame lies in saying nothing and being excluded from the chain reaction. In their quest for potential gut-busters, they come up with put-downs, setups, zingers, sly digs, cheap shots, jokes both Polish and practical, and a funny-name contest with the loser's shoes getting pitched out the window. "Bah-dah-boom!" -- the spoken equivalent of the drummer's rim shot -- is the play's unofficial motto.

At the same time, this frantic comedy squanders its chances to provide more than comic delirium for comic delirium's sake. If the playwright himself hadn't prompted us -- in such recent works as "Broadway Bound" and "Lost in Yonkers" -- to look beyond laughter, maybe the shortcoming would be less evident. He has, though, and we do. Throughout "Laughter on the 23d Floor," he raises the specter of Joseph McCarthy, the red-baiting Senator whose popularity with the American public is rivaling that of Max Prince. The mere mention of McCarthy's name is enough to make Max see red of a different kind and put a fist through the wall. He's eager to do a sketch condemning "Senator Joseph McNutcake" and would, if the writers, aghast, didn't deem it suicidal.

None of them is overreacting. McCarthy represents all those forces -- repression, censorship, intimidation -- that inhibit comedy, which delights in reducing society to rubble. In that respect, the writers' room is a tiny outpost of freedom dedicated to rude noises and irreverent stances. It's in jeopardy -- and not just from the blacklists that McCarthy has tucked away in his suit pocket. The whole nation is growing timorous, turning inward, electing to mind its p's and q's, since minding anything more consequential could prove perilous. Sitcoms, safer and more palatable than Max's anarchic brand of satire, are coming into vogue. Responding to the shift in the national temper, the NBC brass wants to chop "The Max Prince Show" from 90 minutes to an hour and put an "observer" on the set.

That's the provocative background of "Laughter on the 23d Floor," and it could make for interesting complications if it were ever more than just background. But the troubled mood of the country is only alluded to periodically and never finds dramatic outlet in the play itself. Mr. Simon is more concerned with the dynamics among the writers, a star high on pills, liquor and genius, and a blond secretary whose aspirations to contribute gags of her own one day are limited by a singularly feeble sense of humor. Their antics are outlandish and unrelenting. So much so that the writers' room often seems to be orbiting in outer space with little connection to the world down below.

Max may claim he wants no "prima madonnas" on his show. However, as Ira (Ron Orbach), the hypochondriacal writer patterned at least in part on Mr. Brooks, bellows at him, "I can outcrazy you any time, Max." Thereupon, he attempts to repossess one of his jokes by ripping it from that week's script, jamming the paper in his mouth and chewing it up into a spitball. Mr. Orbach, who has the bulk, not to mention the stare, of an agitated hippo, pitches his weight around commandingly.

Mr. Zaks has encouraged a similar forwardness in all the cast members. The lone introvert of the bunch is Lucas (Stephen Mailer), Mr. Simon's stand-in, who also functions as the evening's narrator. New to the job, he keeps his ears open and his eyes peeled, presumably gathering impressions for the very play we're watching. What he saw then and shows us now is a surfeit of funnymen having what one of them suspects is more fun than they'll ever have again in their lives. Once you realize that's pretty much all Mr. Simon has in store, you can focus on your favorites and pay the others less heed, with no compunction that you're missing the bigger picture.

J. K. Simmons is one of the more watchable ones as Brian, the resident Irish-Catholic on the team. He has a long affable face and the ability to take as good as he gives. You wish him well every time he announces excitedly, if prematurely, that Hollywood has just snapped up one of the screenplays that he hasn't yet gotten around to committing to paper.

AS AGGRESSIVE MILT, LEWIS J. Stadlen can't totally shed the association with Groucho Marx that has dogged him ever since he appeared as the comic in the Broadway musical "Minnie's Boys." (Considering that he looks and sounds increasingly like Groucho on a sour morning, spends much of

Mr. Simon's play insulting others with twinkling malice and even wears a black beret on his first entrance, the comparison is not going to go away soon.) Nonetheless, the spurts of high energy and the fine precision timing make Mr. Stadlen, too, one of the welcome presences.

Randy Graff plays the sole woman on the writing staff, although to survive she has to act like a man, curse like a man and suffer through pregnancy like a man. Ms. Graff is game, but the role doesn't carry her very far. Nor does Mark Linn-Baker's. As the head writer, a Russian emigre, he's forever stumbling over his accent -- or the others are. But how many times can you mangle one of the blunter street epithets before that well of laughs dries up?

A still more significant drawback is that everyone is up against Mr. Lane, who gives a performance that may recall Caesar in his heyday to some but reminded me of a pumped-up composite of Jackie Gleason and Don Rickles, no shy violets to begin with. Whether he's erupting with apoplectic anger, plowing his way through a morning-after fog or falling asleep on his feet (the source, seemingly, of his deep rumbling snores), Mr. Lane takes outsized comic risks. Not the least of his brilliance is that he somehow manages to animate passive states -- somnolence, for example, or self-absorption -- as vividly as he does rampaging emotions. He is all the funnier for letting us know that Max has no inkling of how funny he really is.

In his moments of paranoia, however, the embattled character does sense the disturbing truth that Mr. Simon chooses not to pursue, although it hovers on the fringes of the play: Comedy is subversive. The sort of chaos Max foments on the television screen poses a legitimate threat to authority, which will always try to curb such outbursts in the name of order. Had the playwright anchored it in a larger context, "Laughter on the 23d Floor" might well have said something revelatory about the dangers that clowns and jesters encounter whenever society loses its nerve and starts giving in to the bullies.

Unfortunately, the gravest danger Mr. Simon's characters run right now is that someone will step on their punch lines.

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