

Tony Kushner
Reflections on *Angels in America*

1. I have a kind of dangerously romantic reading of American history. I do think there is an advantage to not being burdened by history the way Europe is. This country has been, in a way, an improvisation of hastily assembled groups that certainly have never been together before and certainly have a lot of trouble being together, but who recognize that our destiny is not going to be a racial destiny. Anyone who thinks that completely self-interested politics is going to get you anywhere in America is making a terrible mistake. Which is why I object to Louis Farrakhan. Which is why I object to gays and lesbians in ACT UP who say 'I hate straights.' Or to Jews who think that the only thing that matters is Israel and defense against anti-Semitism. People who don't recognize common cause are going to fail politically in this country. Movements that capture the imagination of people are movements that deny racism and exclusion. The country is too mongrel to do otherwise. This country is made up of the garbage, the human garbage that capitalism created: the prisoners and criminals and religious persecuted and the oppressed and the slaves that were generated by the ravages of early capital. That creates a radical possibility in this country that's unique. (Kushner, Tony Kushner in Conversation, p.16).

2. Another change that is happening, completely as a consequence of the AIDS epidemic, is that it's becoming clearer and clearer to the gay and lesbian community in the States, and probably elsewhere, that there are life and death consequences to homophobia... Whatever the root causes of homophobia are, they are very deep and must in some way be integral to the structure of the heterosexual majority consciousness. Gay theory and gay art in the States are beginning to roll around to this point of view. We've come to reconsider the ways in which the oppression of minority groups is actually part of the central project of the majority. There's a new book by a woman named Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she says that the closet is really the central space in Western consciousness from the beginning of this century, that the dialectics of heterosexuality and homosexuality are incredibly central when you take an overview of Western literature and thought in the last century. (Ibid., p.20)

3. Reading Brecht and Shakespeare at the same time was wonderful because I was discovering what a dialectical method was and finding it was a critical tool for understanding the two playwrights whose work I admired the most. I was also very much drawn in Brecht to the epic form, to the chronicle play. It was almost immediately as soon as I read *Mother Courage* that it became my favourite Brecht. I loved the multifocal, the multiple perspective of it. You, know, Brecht talks about it when he writes about Breughel and the lack of a single point of perspective, the complexity of signs, and the physical conflict in a terribly grandiose prism. I liked this sort of sprawl of the big epic plays in Brecht. (ibid., p.107)

4. A Note About the Staging: The play benefits from a pared-down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!) employing the cast as well as stage-hands – which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be. The moments of magic – the appearance and disappearance of Mr Lies and the ghosts, the book hallucination, and the ending – are to be fully realised, 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. (*Angels in America, I*)

5. One of the things I'm proud of with the play is that it's reminded people that there are a lot of nifty things that the theatre can do, and that we need to push it more in terms of that whole sort of illusion-reality paradigm. The best thing about the theatre is that when the angel comes through at the end of *Millennium* you see the wires, and that's the magic of the theatre, and that's the magic of the theatre that I think speaks most powerfully to our current political conundrum, in that capitalism always seeks to erase the work behind the commodity form, the work that produced, the human labor that produced the effect. What's great about theatre is that it never can do that successfully. And it should try very, very, hard to, because that makes its failure ultimately to do it all the more thrilling. For five seconds, you are actually watching this thing swing down saying, 'It's an angel! I'm seeing an angel!' Then you're saying, 'It's a woman in a silly wig and fly wires,' and that doubleness us the kind of consciousness that citizens of capitalism need to survive, and are constantly being winnowed away from. (Tony Kushner in Conversation, p.215)

6. Ritual is actually a part of what I think of as the road toward at least a more developed agnosticism, or possibly into faith. I'm very interested in prayer. I can't pray. I've been thinking about it and looking at it from various perspectives. And I've always been very moved by Jewish prayer. I think the most moving scene in both parts of *Angels* is when Ethel Rosenberg says Kaddish for Roy Cohn. And the Kaddish has always been a prayer that... I mean, I think it's sort of a genetic thing. It's almost worked into the gene structure at this point. It has tremendous resonance for me. So does the Sh'ma. And I do believe – I wouldn't be in theatre if I didn't believe this – that certain forms of ritual practice can transform one's consciousness through gesture and through design and through ritual. It's about a discipline, also, which, God knows, is a big part of Judaism. (Ibid., p228)

7. A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. The angel of history must appear in this way. He has turned his face towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, there he sees one single catastrophe, which incessantly piles ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and join together what has been smashed apart. But a storm blows out from Paradise, which has captured him in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.