



UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ
The scientific journal FACTA UNIVERSITATIS
Series: **Linguistics and Literature** Vol.2, No 7, 2000 pp. 151 - 174
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KUSHNER'S POLITICAL THEATER

UDC 820(73).09-2

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Abstract. *This paper explores Tony Kushner's epic play **Angels in America** within the tradition of American drama. Though gay themes prevail in the play, Tony Kushner's work foregrounds and critically examines issues crucial to the American identity. Like other playwrights before him - Miller, Williams, Albee, Mamet, Shepard, who challenged and exposed the presumptive myths of American society, a society which has seen the collapse of moral, religious, political and social structures and in which power, sex and material fulfillment have replaced love, compassion and authentic living, Kushner continues this strain of social criticism from the viewpoint of his characters, most of whom are gay, who, as symbols of marginality, voice or witness or exhibit the moral decay, spiritual depletion and self-destructiveness found at the very core of American society. Kushner's apocalyptic view of America, one of a country rushing headlong towards a catastrophic end, and his tragic vision is relieved by his hope in man, who as a social being, can have an impact on the historical process, mainly through political engagement and activism. Though the threat of catastrophe, annihilation and despair looms large in his work, in man lies the hope and the potential for change, and therefore, salvation.*

"The tensions that have defined American history and American political consciousness have most often been those existing between the margin and the center, the many and the few, the individual and society, the dispossessed and the possessors."¹

Tony Kushner, Pulitzer-winning playwright, has won great acclaim with his epic two-part play, **Angels in America (Part One: Millennium Approaches and Part Two: Perestroika)**, a work which has also been very favorably received abroad. It first premiered in London in 1992 and then opened on Broadway in 1993 and ran through December 1994 where, in spite of full houses and the Pulitzer Prize, it closed. Marking a

Received November 01, 2000

¹ Tony Kushner, *American Things, Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York; Theater Communications Group, 1995); p 8.

\$660,000 loss, the play moved on to regional commercial theaters throughout the country in a desperate attempt to reap some financial profit. A masterpiece of gay theater, it is a play, as its subtitle denotes - **A Gay Fantasia on National Themes** - which is kaleidoscopic in theme and character as it attempts to embrace and penetrate the very fabric of American society. Its gayness or queerness is illustrated in its recognition of an America beset with problems of race, morality and religion that all try to contain sexuality within a heterosexual ideal. Though "queer" generally denotes same-sex preference, the term can be extended to include the notion of "abnormality", in other words, marginalisation, with the implication that the socially outcast are a necessary means for the perpetuation and maintenance of the status quo by the power structure. And though the play celebrates sexual, racial and national difference, it delves beneath the surface to reveal a nation where intolerance, racism, discrimination, homophobia are very much present. By juxtaposing class, ethnicity and race, Kushner shows a nation out of control. "A mix of cosmic fantasy and kitchen-sink drama", or in other words, of realism and non-naturalistic styles, the play's non-linear narrative structure, one juxtaposing circumstances through split scenes, efficiently illustrates the fragmentation, the loss of coherence and purpose in the life of its characters.

Like other oppressed groups, women, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, African-Americans and other subcultural groups, gay writers have embarked on a journey not only of self-discovery but also of discovery of a gay literary tradition within the American literary canon. Writers like Tennessee Williams, Alen Ginsberg, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal and others have become role models for young gay writers who have discovered that their isolation and separation from mainstream culture due to their sexual preference, which has stigmatised them as sexual deviants or sexually abnormal, was not anything new, as it had been shared by many others. Writers like Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, professedly homosexuals, veiled the theme of homosexuality in their works or failed to deal with it at all, in their efforts to maintain the appeal they have won with their audience. Thus, Williams' homosexual characters which haunt the past of his main characters (Blanche in **A Streetcar Named Desire** and Brick in **A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**) are symbols of the lonely, rejected exile. The rejectors, Blanche and Brick in this case, are burdened with guilt, a guilt that drives Brick to drink and Blanche to depend on "the kindness of strangers." Brick's failure to face the true nature of his relationship with Skipper drove his friend to drink and drugs and ultimately to his suicide. Blanche's disgust upon catching her homosexual husband in the act was the motivating factor of his suicide, which in turn precipitated her own downfall. Sexual rejection in Williams is an act synonymous with the rejection of life. Whereas sexuality in Miller was nearly always inevitably linked with betrayal, for Williams it signified both betrayal and redemption, torment and consolation. His emotionally and sexually damaged characters, stripped of a social role (most of them being jobless) are truly outcasts, whose only means of resistance is through imagination and a vivifying sexuality. They often opt for myth, lies and illusion, as well as role-playing, as they try to cling to the past and thus ward off time. In **A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**, which Williams defined as a study of mendacity, he portrays an affluent Southern family whose future is uncertain as cancer-ridden Big Daddy, a man of almost ostentatious virility, and the epitome of the myth of the self-made man, favors Brick, his younger son, a former footballer and now an alcoholic, over the obedient and socially exemplary elder son, Gooper, as the inheritor of his worldly gains. Brick's alcoholism, induced by the trauma of his friend's suicide after

his sexuality had been challenged by Maggie, and the fact that he hobbles around on crutches, bespeaks of a man who is trying to blot out the memory of his pain in alcohol, unwilling to face his sexual ambivalence. In an effort to win favor with Big Daddy and silence the malicious and avaricious Gooper and his wife Mae, who rightly suspect the real nature of their marriage, Maggie "the Cat" fabricates a pregnancy, a bold lie she will have to realise if Brick is to secure the property that is rightly his. The play, therefore, logically proposes Brick's redemption through heterosexual intercourse which is integral to the process of capitalist succession. Another play, **Orpheus Descending**, offers an even bleaker and grimmer version of a society in which corruption (here rooted in racism) and violence seems endemic and in which a brutal materialism has its sexual correlative. Death, decay and disease provide the imagery for a society which refuses to abandon its destructive myths and which fears a sexuality which may unite individuals across barriers. The appearance of Val Xavier, whose snakeskin jacket symbolises his animal vitality, upsets the balance. He gets Lady, one of the female characters, pregnant and thus brings her back to life but she is later murdered and he is tortured to death. Although the women offer resistance, they are not catalysts for change as they wield no social power. As man is in Val's words "sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins"² only two consolations are offered him - love and flight - but the two exclude each other as the commitments of the one conflict with the necessities of the other.

While Williams chose to challenge the presumptive myths of American society from within, Arthur Miller's plays explore these myths from without, myths of the inevitability of progress, of perfectability, of the integral self. His concern with the flawed self and the tragic sensibility arose out of the tensions between man and society, society's claims on the self and the public consequences of private acts. Miller's initial plays, in which he equates big business with gangsterism and corruption, were a direct assault on the evils of capitalism. In **All My Sons**, for instance, Joe Keller, an industrialist who sold faulty engines to the Air Force rather than prejudice his contract, fails to acknowledge moral responsibility for his actions. Forced to confront himself by his son, Chris, he commits suicide in an act of redemption.

A probing of American myths is also central to Edward Albee whose works are elegaic in tone and bespeak of a society which "makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures which man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed."³ His critique of the American dream, "predicated on the inevitable rewards awaiting thrift and godliness, which has devolved into simple acquisitiveness"⁴ is most clearly demonstrated in **The American Dream**, a play which Albee defined as "an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacent cruelty, emasculation and vacuity: it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."⁵ The play depicts the American family and the false values it lives by. Characterised by desolation and spiritual depletion, the family is guided by the false promises of power, sex and material fulfillment which have replaced love, compassion, and authentic living. The play, **Everything in the Garden**, aptly demonstrates the moral decay underlying the myth of material betterment

² Harold Bloom, ed. **Modern Critical Views – Tennessee Williams** (New York; Chelsea House Publishers, 1987); p 51.

³ Richard E. Almacher. **Edward Albee**. (Boston; Twayne Publishing, 1982); p 20.

⁴ C.W.E. Bigsby. **Modern American Drama 1945–1990**. (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1992); p 127.

⁵ Almacher, p 23.

as a group of upper-middle-class housewives in Suburbia turn prostitutes in order to satisfy the need for money required by their rather expensive life-style. The fact that they (and their husbands) murder Jack, a wealthy alcoholic neighbor who stumbles on the truth, reveals how far they are prepared to go to preserve their semblance of respectability. The motivating factor is "money", retorts Jenny when her enraged husband calls her "hopelessly immoral", "that standard of judgement...that measure of a man's worth." Immorality has toppled morality as prostitution is regarded as a legitimate business venture, and as appearance replaces substance, illustrated by Jenny's suggestion that they plant flowers and shrubs at the relocated site of the whorehouse to enhance its appearance so as not to arouse suspicion because "if people let them (gardens) go, you know there's something wrong in the house."⁶ As can be seen from the plays above Albee's most powerful characterisations are women who can be in the main described as "life-givers or death angels, fierce maintainers or equally fierce destroyers of the illusions that people live by,"⁷ while the men around them (Daddy, Tobias, Richard, Charlie), with a few exceptions, stammer, hedge and wilt as they pursue the path-of-least-resistance whereby their strategy of withdrawal and disengagement from life brings isolation and a death-in-life existence. In **A Delicate Balance**, for example, a play depicting various forms of waste; wasted marriages, familial relations, whole existences, existential dread lurks behind emotionally crippled Julia's efforts to find shelter and love in her parents' home and alcoholic Claire's desire for love and meaningful relationships. The delicate balancer, Agnes, preserves the spiritual barrenness which paralyses her family; she sells out to a cushioned bourgeois existence, to a life where "there are no mountains...nor chasms" but only "a rolling, pleasant land." The vital lie, the illusion of safety is preserved. However, in **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** the main character, George, by getting his wife, Martha, to admit the falsity of the illusion that has defined their marriage (that they have a son) kills the illusion in a move that is meant to affirm the importance of living honestly. Another couple, Nick and Honey, come to realise their own withdrawal from the real - due to his fear of failure and her fear of sexual contact - and the play ends with Honey's desire to have a baby.

Sam Shepard, no less than Williams, Miller and Albee, has an apocalyptic vision of America, one showing a country, whose subconscious reveals violence and unreason, on the verge of self-destruction. His characters are drifters in the sense that they seek a form of self-annihilation in a world stripped entirely of social demands. Hyper-sensitive and with a fragmented personality, they tread the very edge of insanity. They are spiritual migrants, social outcasts whose suspicion of language drives them to abandon it in an effort to evade the pressures exerted by society or they adopt it as a weapon which screens their fear of abandonment and loneliness. Shepard's men are violent solitaires, usually unemployed and unable to articulate their feelings, while his women are witnesses of male aggression or victims of uncontrolled passion. In **A Lie of the Mind** Jake, in a jealous rage, beats his actress-wife Beth into a state of aphasia, but though she is brain-damaged, she is able to articulate an emotional truth about her parents - "This is my father. He's given up love. My mother is dead for him. Things live for him to be killed."⁸ Her brother, who vies to avenge his sister, is seemingly driven by incestuous

⁶ Edward Albee. **Everything in the Garden**. (New York; Pocket Books, 1969); p 215.

⁷ Ben Brantley. *Albee's Tigers, Albee's Women*. **New York Times** (21 April, 1996); p 22.

⁸ Sam Shepard. **A Lie of the Mind**. (New York; Penguin Books, Inc., 1986); p 57.

motives, while Jake's family reveals an over-protective pyromaniacal mother and an alcoholic father (a pilot) who met an unheroic death by getting run over by a truck. Thus, this play, along with **The Buried Child** and **A Fool for Love**, places another defining American myth under scrutiny - the family. **The Buried Child**, a play describing the homecoming of a grandson, depicts Dodge, an old dying man and his abusive wife, Halie, and their two sons, one an amputee and the other, Tilden, an infantilised man, who are completely indifferent to the plight of their father. Tilden's son, Vince, arrives with his girlfriend, Shelly, who is terrified by their hostility and aggression and who flees the house as Vince begins to exhibit the same cruelty as the rest of the family. The play ends as Tilden enters with the decomposed body of his baby brother, the incestuous product of Tilden and his mother, killed long ago by his father, an image of the past which Dodge (as his name indicates), wishes to deny. Thus the play ends with Vince turning into a version of his father, while Eddie in **A Fool for Love** repeats his father's act of desertion. Therefore, the family becomes a closed system replicating its tensions and contradictions, the members of which are caught in a biological trap which condemns them to re-enactment.

Another playwright who exposed false American myths, especially that of capitalism, is David Mamet, who saw his country as a great myth of avarice.

"America is not America. It is compounded of myths having to do with freedom and equality, of yeomen farmers and sturdy individuals, of spirituality and material enterprise. It propounds a dream of increasing wealth and perfectability; it propounds a singular identity forged out of difference."⁹

Mamet mourns the loss of that spiritual confidence which characterised both individual identity and national enterprise alike. He depicts a society where individualism has collapsed into an alienated solitarism and enterprise into crime. In **A House of Games** conmen justify criminality in terms of business. Using language as a tool to deceive and ensnare, they are able to exploit others because they perceive basic human needs. With settings as diverse as brothels, a junk store, a peepshow, a singles bar and a polluted lake, the predominant image in Mamet's plays is that of decadence and decay. In **Sexual Perversity in Chicago**, set in a singles bar, an effective image of a society in which alienated individuals market themselves, seeking the very companionship they fear, sexuality is presented as devalued, counterfeited, a fetishised commodity. Two men engage in a discussion of their sexual fantasies and try to act them out but there is a large ironic schism between their language of sexual aggression and their fumbling incompetence to perform when confronted with the reality of potential relationships. Failed intimacy and the collapse of relationships is also a theme which Mamet treats in some other plays. **The Woods**, for example, offers us an image of a relationship on the rocks as Ruth tries to establish some sort of connection with Nick. Ruth cloaks her sexual need in a sentimental vocabulary while Nick hides his emotional vulnerability behind a mask of aggression. The play displays Ruth's efforts to establish real contact with him by presenting herself as lover, child and mother, offering in turn reassurance, comfort and love, but Nick counters her efforts with stories of violence and betrayal and then attempts a brutal sexual assault. It is only when Ruth threatens to leave him that Nick is able to

⁹ Bigsby, p 195.

confess his fear, his fear of being hurt, and the play ends with Ruth's story of two lost children who cling to one another for comfort.

Profoundly influenced by Tennessee Williams, Brecht, Melville, and the British socialist playwrights Howard Brenton, Edward Bond, and David Hare, Kushner continues the strain of social criticism, depicting a society nearing a catastrophic end. Like Mamet, who saw that the American dream, a dream based on rape, pillage and expansionism, has turned in upon itself, Kushner shares a similar outlook, viewing the history of his country as "a history of cultural murder, genocide, holocaust, ethnic cleansing... a violent eradication of Otherness."¹⁰ However, he identifies two sets of political traditions in America:

"There are in this country political traditions - from organised labor, from the civil rights and black power movements, from feminist and homosexual liberation movements, from movements for economic reform - which postulated democracy as an ongoing project, as a dynamic process. These traditions exist in opposition to those which make fixed fetishes of democracy and freedom, talismans for Reaction. These traditions, which constitute the history of progressive and radical America, have been shunted to the side, covered over in an attempt at revisionism that began during the McCarthy era."¹¹

Kushner is of the opinion that man can change, that he can have an impact on historical process. The socially oppressed, in his view, can effect change only if they engage in political struggles. They have to strive for civil rights, for legal protection, for enfranchisement. It is no wonder then that Kushner's enthusiasm with the thawing of communism in the Soviet Union and the new political reform movement headed by Gorbachev led to his naming the second play of his epic **Perestroika**.

"I wanted to call it Perestroika because I had this wild-eyed notion that Gorbachev was going to make the world a different place and bring about the advent of democratic socialism which is what makes the most amount of sense to me. I believe that change is terribly hard, but I don't believe that it's impossible, and that's the hope in Perestroika."¹²

The play opens with Aleksii Prelapsarianov, the oldest living Bolshevik, who not only states the major dilemmas faced by the characters but who also voices the need for a vision of the future. "Are We Doomed? Will the Past Release Us? Can We Change? And Theory? How are we to proceed without Theory?" Mother Pitt echoes the same sentiment at the close of the play when she says - "You have to have an idea of the world to go out into the world... you have to have a theory." However, the collapse of communism has left a great vacuum in which capitalism has expanded, an expansion bringing not only privatisation but other ills as well, which the lesbian character Katharina Gleb in **Slavs!** utters: "Gorbachev will come, trailing free-market anarchy in his wake! Burger King! Pizza Hut! The

¹⁰ Tony Kushner. *Some Questions About Tolerance. Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, p 44.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 9.

¹² Patrick Pacheco. *Tony Kushner Speaks Out. Essays on Kushner's Angels*, ed. By Per Brask (Winnipeg, Canada; Blizzard Publishing, 1995); p 25.

International Monetary Fund! Toxic waste!" Kushner's belief in the possibility of change is even illustrated by his play's title, which he derived from the German Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin who, in his attempt to sketch out a theory of history, used Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* to envision an allegory of progress in which the angel of history is poised between past and future. Caught between the history of the world, which keeps piling wreckage at his feet, and a storm blowing from Paradise, the angel "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed (but) the storm propels him blindly into an unknown future."¹³ For Kushner the angel of history serves as a constant reminder of catastrophe (AIDS, racism, misogyny and homophobia) and of the perpetual possibility of change. In this context **Angels in America** is a play about both despair and hope, about the possibility of progress, of radical transfiguration.

Unlike other plays dealing with AIDS which used the illness as a dramatic device, as a way of getting a guaranteed tearjerker finish, Kushner, believing that AIDS need not always equal death and that the illness has been seriously under-represented, cheated his audience out of the deathbed scene, by showing us Prior still living with the illness in the play's Epilogue. And though the play sports a diversity of themes, ranging from estrangement, abandonment, denial, hypocrisy, repression, loss of love, misplaced values and moral decay, withdrawal from human commitment and the decay of relationships, the play is also life-affirming in its love, compassion, forgiveness and stoicism in the face of suffering and death.

Angels in America is undeniably a work in the tradition of gay writing but whereas gay works concerned themselves with presenting the reality of being gay, encompassing the themes of "coming out," of the trials of living within an often hostile heterosexual environment, of the failed attempts to pin down meaningful relationships in a community that believes in sexual freedom, most of which Kushner deals with in his play, he goes beyond the confines of gay politics to scrutinise the civilisation we inhabit and explore the symptoms common to all humanity. Other writers, like Larry Kramer for example, focused mainly on AIDS and gay activism within the gay community. His play, **The Normal Heart** (1985), is an important predecessor to Kushner's **Angels** and is an exemplary gay work. A phenomenal success, it holds the record for the longest run at New York's Shakespeare Festival and has received over 600 world-wide productions. Based on Kramer's own life and struggles, it follows the activities of a gay activist, Ned Turner, who is ousted from the very organisation he has helped found (ACT UP) since he advocates a more radical stance on the gay lifestyle as a result of the onset of the AIDS epidemic. His political activism is overshadowed by AIDS to which his partner, Felix, succumbs at the close of the play, but not before Ned earns the due love and respect of his straight lawyer of a brother. Kramer's novels and plays, which preached love and compassion and meaningful relationships, aroused a great deal of controversy in the gay community in that they offered satirical critiques of promiscuity, then widely regarded as a fundamental plank of the gay liberation platform. This view is articulated by Ned in the play:

" For many gay men sex has become a way of connecting, a sort of addiction, whereby men are caught in a web of peer pressure to perform and perform."¹⁴

¹³ David Savran. *The Theater of the Fabulous. Essays on Kushner*; p 131.

¹⁴ Larry Kramer. **The Normal Heart**. (New York; New American Library, 1985); p 38.

More importantly, however, the play condemns the outrageous political silence and passivity in the face of the AIDS crisis, the largest health crisis in this century, as politicians and the media ignored the danger of a disease they regarded to be largely confined to so-called "risk groups", homosexuals, drug addicts and hemophiliacs, groups which seemingly posed no threat to the straight male and female majority. The play covers a period of five years, during which it follows the progression of the epidemic and the rising death toll. The play is in itself an onslaught on Ronald Reagan, New York's Mayor Koch (both Republicans) and the New York Times; in short, on the Republicans then in power who, fearing the stigma of being too sympathetic to the gay community, dragged their feet and wavered when the situation demanded action, but the real reason was, of course, economic since a declaration of an epidemic would have been financially devastating to New York's billion-dollar-a-year tourist industry. Kramer's following play, **The Destiny of Me** (1992), which continues the story of Ned Weeks, now HIV positive and undergoing experimental treatment, and which weaves in flashbacks from Ned's childhood as he struggles with his emerging homosexuality, played runner-up to Kushner's **Angels in America** for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize.

KUSHNER'S ANGELS IN AMERICA

The first part of this epic play, **Millenium Approaches**, opens up with the funeral service of one Sarah Ironson, a woman of Jewish origin and an immigrant from Eastern Europe. Her name (Sarah Ironson) not only denotes strength of will and determination of spirit but it is also reminiscent of the Biblical matriarch Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who bore him Isaac late in life, the mother of nations, and even of the prepatriarchal Mother Goddess. Her large family of five children and ten grandchildren is a testimony to a woman who had dedicated herself to the giving and nurturing of life. The epithets used by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz to describe her - "devoted wife, loving and caring mother, beloved grandmother"- cannot do her justice because Sarah, in his view, was "a whole kind of person." In her he sees the "last of the Mohicans", the last of their generation. As the remnant of Old World values and the traditional way of life, Sarah resembles Edward Albee's Grandma character in **The American Dream** in that she, too, represents "the vigorous old frontier spirit" for

"she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat,
and she put it down on Grand Avenue, and she worked the earth
into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient
culture and home."¹⁵

Sarah was a defender of Old World values; a preserver of tradition so that her children would not forget their origin and abandon their cultural heritage. The Rabbi understood her mission in life - to preserve one's cultural and ethnic identity- for he knows that "America" is a non-existent myth, that it is a melting pot where nothing melted. In other words, ethnic identity is necessary if one is to have true knowledge of oneself. The playwright David Hwang puts it this way: " By confronting our ethnicity, we are simply

¹⁵ Tony Kushner. **Angels in America – Millenium Approaches** (New York; Theater Communications Group, 1992); p 10.

confronting the roots of our humanity."¹⁶

However, we see that her grandson, Louis, a third-generation American, is totally out of touch with his heritage. Family ties (he never visited Sarah at her retirement home) and religious ties (he is inarticulate in Yiddish) have been drastically severed. Louis has already been completely indoctrinated into the system, into the new ideology. He harbors a nontragic, neo-Hegelian positivist view of the world, seeing life as constant historical progress towards a perfect or happy resolution. His allegiance to these uphill-moving forces exclude the acceptance of sickness, disease, vomit, death, in short, the invasion of the body or self by natural forces. This view clearly prognosticates his desertion of Prior, an AIDS-infected partner of four-and-a-half years. At the very outset of the play, starting with the funeral scene, Kushner prepares the terrain for Louis's desertion of Prior; Louis breaks down following Prior's enumeration of the symptoms of Kaposi's sarcoma, he cannot face the fact of his lover's inevitable death. He goes as far as to ask Prior if he will harbor any ill will in case he leaves him, to which he receives an affirmative answer. Louis takes this crucial step when he finally takes the worn-out Prior to the hospital where, in the conversation with Emily, a nurse, he recounts the story of Mathilda, the loyal and devoted wife of William the Conqueror. Louis sees her as the paragon of wifely virtue, a woman who would have welcomed her husband from the wars, be he mutilated, full of infection and horror, with love, compassion and pity. In juxtaposing his lack of devotion as Prior's lover with Mathilda's angelic qualities, Louis portrays a disintegrating image of self-worth and, guilt-ridden and full of self-loathing, he goes to the park where he has a casual sexual encounter. Overcome by a masochistic urge, Louis abandons himself to the sexual act which, continuing despite the rubber breaking, becomes a suicidal gesture on Louis's part - "Keep going. Infect me. I don't care." Later, in the coffee shop scene with Belize, a Black and an ex-drag queen, Louis sums up the image he has of himself; he is one of the Judas Iscariots, "people who... in betraying what they love, betray what's truest in themselves."¹⁷ And although he confesses he misses Prior, he is afraid he too might have become infected. This is a lame excuse, indeed, for Louis cannot stand the sight and the smell of the sick Prior.

In juxtaposition to the Old World as represented by Sarah, Kushner dramatises the new world through the character of Roy Cohn, a historically based portrait of a man who is Mephistophelian in his villainy. As chief counsel to Senator Joseph McCarthy he mercilessly pursued an anti-Communist crusade in the 50's that destroyed the lives of countless Americans, culminating in the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for treason. A closeted homosexual with AIDS, he maintained till the very end that he was suffering from liver cancer when it was evident that his death was AIDS-related. In short, he is the arch-villain of the play, the embodiment of evil, moral corruption, power brokerage and control. Some critics point out, Donald Lyons among them, that the character of Roy Cohn is loaded with too much symbolic weight; he is "McCarthyism, closetedness, Reagenism, conservatism, and ultimately not-niceness in general."¹⁸ In other words, Roy Cohn is the internalisation of the worst, most vulgar aspects of American culture. The first scene in which Roy appears portrays a man who wields power through his manipulation of language as he conducts several conversations over

¹⁶ Bigsby, p 329.

¹⁷ Kushner, *Millenium Approaches*, p 99.

¹⁸ David Lyons. *The Trouble with Angels. Against the Grain*, ed. by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago; Ivan R. Dee, 1995); p 175.

the phone simultaneously. As a lawyer, he is the High Priest of America for lawyers, in his words, alone know how to use the Words, the Law. His use of language ranges from one of seduction to one of threats and insults. He often employs language that is coarse, crude and brutal. For Roy, words have no concrete meanings; they are merely "improvisational tools in a bricoleur design." Roy Cohn's visit to Dr Henry, in the course of which he is diagnosed as having AIDS, reveals his attitude towards language. To Roy, words are labels, and as such are devoid of any essential meaning.

"AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. ... Like all labels they tell you one thing only; where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout."¹⁹

The homosexual identity is undesirable to Roy because politically, homosexuals are non-influential and powerless, and as a result are non-achievers. In Roy's vocabulary they have zero clout. "Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys." In this scene Roy resorts to the most awful threats to browbeat his doctor into diagnosing him with liver cancer.

Roy Cohn also echoes Tennessee Williams' Big Daddy figure in **A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**, both being emblematic of a society whose corruption is reflected in the cancer/AIDS eating away at them and epitomising its pointless acquisitiveness and fierce egotism. Power is thus in the hands of those who represent moral anarchy and whose sexual orientation (Roy, the gay surrogate father; Big Daddy's gay son) stands for an apocalyptic potential.

Roy's view of the world is one in which "a kind of sandstorm rages" with "winds of mega-hurricane velocity" blowing not grains of sand but "shards and splinters of glass." Life, in other words, is a battle for survival and if one is to survive one must have, in Harper's words, "a thick skin" so that devastating things like death and pain and loss don't get to you. Existential fear seems to lie at the heart of man-made culture, a fear springing from his alienated state from Nature, whose raw, brutal, uncompromising forces have been belittled and demeaned in significance by man. Man has found consolation in opting for controllable and malleable forces of change, social forces, thus creating meaningful, purposeful change - history - in an otherwise seemingly merciless and meaningless existence. The character of Pizzaro in Shaffer's **The Royal Hunt of the Sun** appropriately describes the human condition in these terms, as one of agonising loneliness in the face of unresponsive Nature, a loneliness combatted by man's construction of shelters, by his projection of systems of belief and institutions designed to uphold the various ideologies which, acting as a safety screen, only offers the illusion of safety. At the heart of these institutions is Roy Cohn himself, a man who can, after all, get the President's wife on the phone in under fifteen minutes.

If Roy symbolizes the Father of a phallogocentric society, the power-holder, then the question as to who will carry on his work will inevitably rise, a question made more puzzling by the fact that Roy's own sexual identity can be destructive of the very system whose values he is propagating. Roy, however, admits to Joe, his "Prodigal Son," that the father-son relationship is "central to life."

¹⁹ Kushner, **Millenium Approaches**, p 45.

"Women are for birth, beginning, but the father is continuance.
The son offers the father his life as a vessel for carrying forth
his father's dream."²⁰

Joe, plagued by doubts regarding his father's love for him, a military man who was cold and unfair and who did not display affection for his son, is offered a surrogate father figure in Roy Cohn, surrogate fathers being people, as he explains to Joe, who will help him get on in the world, open doors for him, give him a boost in life. In this vein, Roy wholeheartedly yearns to initiate Joe into the Big Leagues of politics by offering him an opportunity to be where the action is, in this case, the political capital of the U.S., Washington D.C. But as we can surmise from Roy's patronising treatment of Martin Heller and Dr Henry, Joe would be just another victim of Roy's manipulative will and crude selfishness. By offering him a chance to become "one of the mighty" as he describes Martin Heller, a man of influence, Roy stands to have his own man in the Justice Department who will defend him in the upcoming disbarment proceedings. Joe is shocked into knowledge when he learns that the reason why Roy is being disbarred is that he had stolen half a million dollars from one of his clients, a claim Roy refutes, since no paperwork was involved in the transaction and thus no proof of its occurrence exists. Far from being a picture of moral purity himself, Joe is nonetheless shocked by Roy's unethical behavior, though he is aware of his unorthodox ways. He realises that what Roy is proposing he do in Washington is illegal and unethical. Roy offers him a profoundly different version of his persecution - It's him vs them. - the Establishment has declared war on him because he had overstepped the bounds of the law and dishonored the rules which he was supposed to abide by. Roy, however, recognises no rules. The Law, for him, is not "a dead and arbitrary collection of antiquated dictums" but "a pliable, breathing, sweating organ."²¹ In his desperate attempt to retain his lawyer's licence until his death, he explains to Joe that the name of the game is politics, it being "no Sunday school" but essentially dirty, bloody and stinking.

In addition to resorting to flattery, praising Joe for his decency, smarts and for being a Royboy, Roy also plays on Joe's feelings when he reveals to him that he is dying of cancer. And last but not least, Martin Heller presents Joe with the alluring image of political hubub in D.C. - The Republican Party is on the move and well on its way to gain control of the Supreme Court; the Federal Bench will be peopled by Republican judges who will have their say on every important political issue ranging from abortion and defense to Central America, education and family values. The Party's long-term goal is to gain control of the Senate and get their own man in the Oval Office, thus putting a lid on Liberalism and New Deal Socialism.

Flattered and honored by the offer, Joe informs Roy that he will have to consult his wife, Harper, on the matter. However, with the dissolution of his marriage, Joe is urged to seek a divorce because, in Roy's view, "love and responsibility are traps." He tells Joe to learn what he is capable of and let nothing stand in his way. Joe, however, is not driven by ruthless ambition as Cohn is, and he declines the offer, refusing to break the laws. And though he claims he does not have it in him, we see that he is capable of "bending the law", which Louis later reveals in his onslaught on Joe regarding the legal decisions he

²⁰ Ibid, p 56.

²¹ Ibid, p 66.

had made. His refusal draws a violent response from Roy, whose influence has helped make and unmake Presidents, mayors, and judges, but who holds up, as his greatest accomplishment, the conspiracy which led to the death of Ethel Rosenberg. Joe is shocked to find out that Roy had masterminded a conspiracy that led to murder, and attributes this confession to Roy's illness. Challenging him to transgress and urging him to choose, Roy utters his motto - "Do you want to be NICE or do you want to be EFFECTIVE? Make the law, or be subjected to it?"²² Joe, caught between the demands of his private self as exhibited by his sexual identity crisis, and those of the social self, chooses to decline the offer, and tries to come to terms with the turmoil in his life.

His wife, Harper, one of the three main female characters in the play besides that of Sarah and Hannah Pitt, her mother-in-law, lives in a state of excruciating loneliness. Unlike Joe, who is convinced that America has rediscovered itself and its "sacred" position among nations and who feels that things are better than they were six years previously when "the world seemed in decline, horrible, hopeless, full of unsolvable problems and crime and confusion and hunger,"²³ Harper's view of the world is antipodal to her husband's. She sees that the state of things has not changed much. The aforementioned problems still exist and have not been solved. To her, Washington, a place full of giant cemeteries and graves and mausoleums, is a symbol of decay and death. Harper, in other words, holds an apocalyptic view of the world. "Old fixed orders are spiralling apart. Everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving away."²⁴ The state of things is alarming and nearly borders the catastrophic. "Something must give," says Harper, as she muses on the coming of the third millenium, a time which might bring new life, abundance and prosperity, real companionship and protection, safety from what's outside, or one which might bring devastation and destruction, the end of life itself. Underlying this is Harper's acute sense of insecurity and uncertainty regarding her life in general and her marriage to Joe in particular. She is aware that something has gone amiss with them and that they are both terribly unhappy. Harper tries to fight it off, telling Joe that they are pretend-happy, happy enough where they are. Her unhappiness stems largely from her husband's nightly excursions. She feels he is hiding something from her, that he is avoiding her. Her recourse to valium induces hallucinations which become more long-lasting and absorbing as she discovers what her husband's true nature really is. At the beginning of the play Harper's imaginary friend, Mr Lies, a symptomatic emblem of her loneliness, offers her a chance of escape into dream and fantasy. Harper's flight into dream or fantasy, like Briget's in Harold Pinter's **Moonlight**, is an escape route; offering a cloistered retreat, a refuge where she can feel secure and breathe free. The hallucination in which she sees Prior and gains knowledge of her husband's true sexual nature is described by Prior as "the threshold of revelation." Harper's and Prior's state of mind is such that it evokes a kind of epiphanic sight or intuitive knowledge; she can see how very sick Prior is while he sees how terribly unhappy she is. They are able to diagnose the cause of each other's illness, he attributing hers to her husband's being a homosexual, while she sees beyond his physical illness and discerns that his innermost being is disease-free, utterly healthy. Both illnesses, each in its own way, is sexually-rooted; Prior's contraction of AIDS may have been the cause of

²² Ibid, p 108.

²³ Ibid, p 26.

²⁴ Ibid, p 17.

his or his partner's sexual promiscuity; Harper's may have been the cause of sexual deprivation or her unfulfilled maternal nature.

In the confrontation scene with Joe, Harper, in a fit of anger, demands to know his whereabouts and insists on his revealing his true sexual identity. Moreover, in giving Joe the diagnosis of her unhappiness - "a mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife"²⁵ - she comes to the realisation that he finds sex with her repulsive, that he is, in fact, a complete stranger to her. Their love life, he explains, is so unsatisfactory because he finds her unattractive - she sweats when she takes the pills and then she is not pretty. The sexual act in their marriage is one of punishment; neither of them derive pleasure from it. He finally confesses that he never harbored any sexual feelings for her. Though initially he brushes off Harper's attempts to learn the truth about him, and he evades giving a direct answer by resorting to Mormon talk, to which Harper turns a deaf ear, Joe, extremely provoked by Harper's question as to whether he is a homosexual or not, expresses his innermost struggle - he is one thing deep within, a thing he has fought hard against. Since his homosexual urge could not be completely suppressed, a suppression embodied in the self-depicting metaphor of Jacob's Wrestling with the Angel, "a beautiful golden-haired man with wings," Joe identifying with Jacob, a mere mortal who, on taking on a superhuman struggle, is doomed to end in failure, Joe's life had been one of perpetual struggle against his innermost self. In a moving confession he describes the arousal of physical desire at seeing an attractive prospective partner as "a nail, a hot spike right through the heart," a blinding passion, breaking down all his defenses, blotting out everything else save his all-consuming need. He has worked hard to become good and decent and he sees her efforts at trying to learn the truth about him as destructive. The fact is that Joe, by trying to behave correctly and decently in the eyes of religion and law, had been inflicting punishment and pain on himself, brought on by his suppression of his true sexual nature, by denial of his true self. His acceptance of the conventional heterosexual model of happiness as set down by society has made Joe "live dead" and has caused him to "put his heart on hold," therefore confining him to a way of life which has stunted the act of self-realisation.

In his conversation with Roy, Joe reveals Harper's traumatic family background. She had had a bad home life - "there was drinking, lots of physical stuff" - her life had been in constant danger. The feeling of persecution, images of the sky falling down, of men with knives under sofas, is still very real for Harper. What attracted him to Harper was "the part of her that is farthest from the light, from God's love." She stood out in Salt Lake City because she was always out of step, always did something wrong. She was an outsider, a transgressor in a religious community whose members vied to live their lives according to the scriptures of their religion's founder.

His marriage, based on his conviction that he could save Harper from herself, that he can be her savior, has transgressed one of the basic creeds of marriage - that of love. His admission that he harbors no sexual feelings of any kind for his wife is a devastating blow to Harper who, shattered by the knowledge that their marital life had been a great lie, a farce, from the very beginning, flees into her fantasy world, the realm of imagination, Antarctica. Her flight into fantasy not only provides a temporary escape route from life's turmoils, but it also shows what Harper's innermost being yearns for - to love and to be loved - to have a genuine relationship, one by means of which she can realise

²⁵ Ibid, p 36.

herself as a woman. There, in the Kingdom of Ice, life is pain-free, sorrow cannot materialise because there "tears freeze." Accompanied by Mr Lies, Harper enthusiastically plans on "setting up camp," building a city of forts by the river, in spite of his efforts to dampen her spirits by reminding her that "ice has a way of melting, that Antarctica is only a temporary escape." In her frenzy Harper feels all-powerful; she creates what she needs just by imagining it. In a setting nearly completely devoid of life Harper fabricates a pregnancy and calls forth for an Eskimo to appear.

In reality, however, Harper is busted by the police in Prospect Park for stealing a pine tree; actually, she has been caught gnawing one. As the interplay of reality and fantasy progresses Harper sees Joe in bed with Louis and asks him to come back to her, but he refuses. It seems astonishing to Harper why, in spite of all the heartbreak and emotional suffering she is experiencing, she is still alive and full of desire for a man who obviously does not love her.

Harper is picked up at the police station by Mother Pitt, her mother-in-law, a positive female character, to whom we are introduced in the confessional phone call scene in the course of which Joe reveals his true sexual nature to his mother. Hannah tries to block this knowledge off, expressing fear upon learning that her son is making a 4 a.m. phone call from Central Park, and attributing his erratic behavior to drinking. Though her first reaction is denial, she is, in fact, well aware of what her son is. Running to his aid, Hannah sells her house in Salt Lake City and heads for Brooklyn, only to find herself lost and disoriented in the Bronx, facing a bag lady out of whom she tries to get directions. The bag lady is the most painful example of an individual living on the margins of society, an outsider whose life has been reduced to mere physical survival. She calls herself "a feeding animal" and "a fat loathsome whore" - epithets used by society for those discarded and of no use. The woman is psychotic, language is fragmented and disconnected. In a humor-imbued scene Hannah takes a stand against this homeless woman, orders her to pull herself together and tell her how to get to Brooklyn or the Mormon Visitor's Center. The woman, uttering short logical phrases, directs her to the center and for a moment seems almost normal.

Once in New York Hannah tries to help Harper get on with her life and patch things up with Joe. She urges her daughter-in-law to find a job and keep herself busy but Harper, who is still pining away for Joe, just wishes herself dead. Hannah's nurturing aspect can be discerned in the scene where she makes Harper put on a dress and comb her hair. Realising how emotionally devastated Harper is, she imparts onto her wise advice - "You have to accept it - with faith and hard work you reach a point where the disappointment doesn't hurt so much, and then it gets actually easy to live with."²⁶ Following a series of attempts Hannah finally meets her son and from their ensuing conversation it becomes clear that Hannah does not justify her son's desertion of his wife, after which Joe decides to go back to Harper, only to find the apartment empty.

Harper visits the Mormon Visitor's Center, where Mother Pitt volunteers, and where she meets Prior. They watch the show as the story of their religion's founder is narrated by the father who, along with his wife, two sons, and a daughter, is on a wagon-train exodus to the Promised Land, Salt Lake City. The wife and daughter are silent throughout; they have no lines, which only shows their subordinated position in society. Watching the show Harper realises that religion itself offers fake promises. A scene in

²⁶ Kushner, *Perestroika*, p 37.

which Harper and Prior come face to face with Louis and Joe, each finding out something about each other, ends with Hannah taking the grief-stricken and very ill Prior to the hospital and with Harper having an imaginary conversation with the Mormon mother. Asking her if people change, Harper is told that "God tears out your guts, splits you open but doesn't stitch you back together - you have to do the stitching."²⁷ Thus, spiritual healing is left up to the individual sufferer, who with "mangled guts pretending," has to live with the pain. Harper has completely lost faith; she does not have a system of values to fall back on.

Joe finally returns to Harper but things have not changed. The act of making love is performed out of a sense of duty for Joe keeps his eyes closed, admitting to Harper that he imagines men when he is with her. Clearly embittered, Harper, whose love for Joe is the only reality, realises that she is "nothing" to him. Upon taking a large dose of valium pills she finds herself in Heaven where she reveals to Prior Joe's real nature; "he's got a sweet hollow center, but he's the nothing man."²⁸ Armed with the truth, Harper is ready to let go of him, to relinquish the hold her love has on him. She leaves Joe while he halfheartedly tries to detain her, telling her she's his good heart, that she's the only one who has ever loved him, that he has done terrible things but he has changed. Harper gives him a deserving slap, a gesture evocative of the pain he had caused her. Giving him the pills, she tells him to go exploring, to get lost. Harper leaves for Los Angeles, walking "unencumbered into the morning." In this world, she reflects, there is only painful progress, looking for what we've left behind and dreaming ahead.

The character of Prior, in the view of many, comprises the real crux of the play, even though his torment, being both of a physical and mental nature, seems to be peripheral, which is mainly due to the great interweaving network of characters in the play. Prior, who informs Louis of the first tell-tale symptoms of AIDS (weight loss, swollen lymph glands, fever..), is a young gay man in love, who is stricken with a fatal disease, the outcome of which is imminent death. He is aware that Louis will take it hard and is afraid that he might leave him, that he would "let himself off scot-free, no judgement, no guilt or responsibility," but that still does not prepare him for Louis's desertion of him. His one-sentence depiction of his lover which he gives as a warning to Joe's mother sums it all up - "Louis can't handle bodies."

Prior, a drag queen, is filled with bitterness at the thought of dying at so young an age, "robbed of...decades of majesty." He feels dirty, contaminated, his heart is pumping polluted blood. He starts hearing voices, taking them to be a symptom of his disease. Death, to Prior, is terrifying, made even more so by the waiting, the uncertainty as to when his time will run out. As his symptoms multiply and his suffering intensifies, Prior becomes a physical wreck and is finally taken to the hospital, where Louis leaves him.

Prior awakes to find his former lover and an ex-drag queen, Belize, a Black nurse, by his bedside, who tries to reassure Prior as to Louis's whereabouts, though Prior already knows he has been "ditched." The voices again are registered by Prior who now finds solace in them. The voices announce the arrival of a "glorious work", a work that will entail "reform...abolish a great lie, correct a great error." From the very beginning, the voice has an erotic effect on Prior, culminating at times in an orgasm, which also affects another character, Hannah Pitt, in the same way.

²⁷ Ibid, p 79.

²⁸ Ibid, p 122.

In the final showdown scene between Prior and Louis, Louis informs him that he is moving out of their apartment, emphasizing his need for privacy and self-preservation. He claims he loves Prior who, using legal jargon, mocks Louis at every turn, passing out the verdict which finds his lover's heart "deficient," and judges his love to be "worth nothing." Even Louis justifies his love for Prior as a failure, though he does not see his desertion of Prior as a crime. Prior feels that there is an unspoken law of love regarding the person you love in a time of need and orders Louis out of the room. Belize, in a later scene, echoes the same sentiment when he says that "love is hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love."²⁹

Prior experiences visitations from two of his ancestors, Prior Walters, who have been sent to announce the arrival of the great message-conveying Angel. Though he is addressed with names denoting great respect - The Prophet, the Seer, the Revelator - the thing that weighs most heavily on his mind is the imminent fact of his death. The spirits of his ancestors refuse to reveal anything about his future, maintaining that death is "a private, lonely act," through which each individual goes alone. In the midst of his emotional turmoil, Prior's home is invaded by the Great Messenger Angel who makes her appearance by crashing through the ceiling, the result of which not only arouses panic in Prior but sexual excitement as well. Thus ends the first part of **Millenium Approaches**, as Prior comments on the Spielberg-like effect of the Angel's entrance.

Along parallel lines, as the illness is taking its toll on Prior and his relationship with Louis is breaking down, his partner embarks upon a new relationship with Joe. Both employees at the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, Joe being the chief clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson, and Louis as a word processor, they meet in the washroom of this legal institution. The scene portrays Louis grieving over AIDS-stricken Prior, and Joe trying to comfort him by providing him with a wad of toilet paper. He was the only person to have approached Louis and to have asked what the matter was. Louis instantly recognises that Joe is gay, the fact of which is at first denied, but later acknowledged as Louis teases him. Their second meeting finds them on the steps of the Hall of Justice in Brooklyn where they discuss the family of the American Animus, Ronald Reagan, and wonder what it is like to be a member of that family. Both Louis and Joe believe that they do not in the least typify a close, loving family; there obviously being no connections and no love among them. Their discussion grows to include their views on responsibility. Nowadays, Louis muses, there are no connections, no responsibilities. "All of us are falling through the cracks that separate what we owe to ourselves and what we owe to love."³⁰ Joe imagines the great but terrifying loneliness one would feel upon shedding off connections and responsibilities, if one did not owe anything to anyone. That, of course, is impossible, for man, in trying to engage in a meaningful relationship with another human being, is also making a connection, one which also entails commitment and a large dose of responsibility. Telling Joe he has moved out on a sick friend only emphasizes his belief that they are all "Reagan's children" who are "selfish and greedy and loveless and blind." But, in spite of the fact that they do not share the same political convictions, they both desire to be loved, even though they both think they are undeserving of love.

Louis manages to seduce Joe, and the experience is enjoyed by both of them, especially by Joe who actually feels reborn; in a word - "alive." Ridden by guilt, Joe

²⁹ Ibid, p 71.

³⁰ Ibid, p 35.

expects "divine retribution" for it. Nonetheless, he tries to justify his behavior in the given situation. "The rhythm of history is conservative. Change is geologically slow. You must accept as rightfully yours the happiness that comes your way."³¹ In the ensuing political discussion Joe reiterates Roy Cohn's motto - Do you want to be NICE or do you want to be EFFECTIVE? - the methods the Republicans employ might be extreme but they are effective. McCarthyism, Watergate, George Bush are all forms of corruption. Political miscreants are responsible for everything bad and evil in the world. The very same politicians whom Joe voted for and supports are made objects of demonization, especially Reagen. Louis finds Joe's politics hard to stomach but it attracts him to Joe.

Joe and Louis discuss their desertion of their partners. Joe comforts Louis by explaining that "freedom is the right to make choices. All that life can offer in the face of these terrible decisions is that you can make the choices freely." Joe looks upon Louis's desertion of Prior as a very hard but brave act, while Louis maintains that what he has done is simply unforgivable and despicable, which makes him out to be a horrible person. However, Joe sees him as a nice, decent man, and expresses admiration for him. Louis returns the compliment, remarking that Joe is a decent, caring man, seemingly free and happy, undisturbed by bad dreams, not ridden by guilt. Louis breaks down and cries and Joe holds him. As their relationship develops, Joe falls in love with Louis, who still misses Prior, and when Joe expresses his true feelings for him, Louis seems rather incredulous. He does not know what the word means. "Love is still what I don't get ... it never seems to fit into any of the schematics."³² And because Louis is still emotionally bound to Prior, Joe, who is afraid of losing him, is willing to relinquish his past.

It is his very past, however, that causes Louis to lash out. In a rage of anger, he accuses Joe of being "immoral." The legal decisions he had made, one finding against women who sued a New Jersey toothpaste factory because its smoke blinded children, arguing that the Air and Water Protection Act did not protect "people" but only "air and water;" the other decision by which a gay army guy got fired before retirement due to his sexual orientation. The guy won back his pension on a technicality. Joe changed the reason for the decision; the army knew that the man was gay when he enlisted, not that it was unconstitutional to discriminate against homosexuals. Joe actually found the gay man to be a member of a legal minority and was thus entitled to special protection under the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution - Equal Protection Under the Law. He was actually discriminating against homosexuals. Furious at learning this about Joe, Louis accuses him of fag-bashing and assaults him. Joe's reply in defense echoes Roy Cohn's motto - "It's law, not justice; it's power." Louis, having found out Joe's connection to Roy, tells him that Roy is "the most evil, twisted, vicious bastard ever to snort coke,"³³ and reveals that Roy has AIDS, demanding to know if they have ever fucked. Joe imparts a series of punches at Louis, one of which gives him a bloody nose.

This moral conflict reveals another side of Joe. He has, in fact, not only betrayed himself by maintaining a pretend-to-be-happy marriage to a woman he does not care about, but he has also betrayed the very community (the gay community) he is trying to join openly by coming out of the closet. The Joe praised by Roy for his decency and smarts is not a morally upright person. It appears as if he has opted for the conservative

³¹ Ibid, p 74.

³² Ibid, p 111.

³³ Ibid, p 62.

forces, as represented by Roy, McCarthy and Reagen, those very forces which stifle any possibility of change for the better or for progress which would benefit all humankind. However, as is the case with all of Kushner's characters, Joe does have a redeeming quality. He does retain a sense of responsibility (seen most clearly in his efforts to patch things up with Harper), and respect for the Law (exemplified by his refusal of Roy's offer because he can't break the rules).

His health rapidly deteriorating, Roy Cohn is hospitalized. In spite of his being in great pain, Roy resents the fact that Belize, a Black nurse, is attending on him. Persistently aggressive, mean and a loudmouth, Roy's vulnerability is soon discernible. Overcome by fear, loneliness and pain, he is at the mercy of something he cannot control. He seeks companionship and to that end asks Belize to stay with him. Though Belize harbors no warm sentiments or good opinion of Roy, he warns Roy to avoid radiation treatments since it will drastically reduce the amount of T-cells. Knowing that Roy pulled strings to get in on the miracle drug trials, he also tells him about the double blind - he will have to sign sheets to get pills instead of the real thing. Roy again resorts to blackmail and coercion, threatening Martin Heller with public exposure if he does not get him the AZT pills.

The progression of his illness is witnessed by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg who appears at the end of Part One where she has Roy taken to the hospital. Though Ethel seems at times to take a gentle but mocking interest in Roy, she, driven by revenge and a deep-seated hate has, in fact, come to witness the political destruction (disbarment) and death of the man who had plotted to have her convicted for treason. She evidently takes pleasure in his misery, considering his death far worse than hers because he is dying defeated and in shit. Roy voices his lack of fear of both her and death alike. He regards himself as being immortal because he has forced himself into history. And as always, Roy and the telephone are inseparable; it is the means by which he performs "basic bodily functions."

Roy shows off his stash of AZT to Belize, who is greatly impressed and who takes three bottles of the medication for Prior. Roy resents this and considers it unfair. He has worked hard all his life and does not deserve to end up like that. "Americans have no use for the sick," he tells Belize, "It's no country for the infirm."³⁴ In a state of delirium brought on by morphine Roy asks Belize what comes after death. The image of the hereafter that Belize offers is certainly not a bright one, portraying Heaven as "a place like San Francisco," a city in a state of ruin and decay, "more like a city hit by a natural calamity" or one which "has endured a terrible war;" a weed-infested place full of ravens, with "lots of racial impurity and gender confusion" and creole/mulatto deities. On the verge of death, Roy takes leave of Joe, giving him his blessing and urging him to terminate his affair with Louis and return to his wife lest he regrets it later. Ethel reappears to inform him that he has been disbarred; he has been beaten, and put out of action. Roy, then, on the pretence of seeing his mother, asks Ethel to sing to him so as to dispel his fear of death and Ethel, thinking that Roy is dying, humors him by singing a song, after which he plays dead. He fools her, thereby having the last laugh. "I win!" he shouts exuberantly to Ethel, and seconds later, overcome by painful spasms, finally succumbs. A Kaddish prayer of thanks (for the medicine left to Prior) is said over the body by Louis, who is unknowingly guided by Ethel's ghost.

³⁴ Ibid, p 52.

Meanwhile Prior, driven by bitterness and jealousy, visits Louis's workplace with Belize, a mutual friend, in the hope of catching a glimpse of his new lover, Joe. Upon seeing Joe, Prior mockingly portrays him as the "Marlboro Man," a mega-butth figure, an exemplary image of American machoism, and his ex-lover, Louis, as the "Whore of Babylon." Throughout Prior's illness, Belize, a Black male nurse, is shown as a good friend. Down-to-earth, practical, but nurturing and compassionate with a wiry sense of humor, Belize harbors no ideal picture of people and the world he inhabits. He sees America as a country which has been built on big ideas and myths, but which offers little freedom and a lot of death. In his words, America is "terminal, crazy, and mean."

Prior's mission becomes clear with the Angel's appearance in his home. The Angel epitomizes the Bald Eagle, the Spirit of America, the Continental Principality. Prior Walter is to become an all-seeing, truth-seeking prophet, the Great Vocalist, the Tongue-of-the-Land, the Seer-Head. Feeling scared and confused, Prior is forced by the Angel to look for the Sacred Book under his kitchen, and read it.

Prior is confronted with a crisis. The Angel, a hermaphrodite, relates the operation of the Great Machine, of the Great Work.. God is portrayed as the premieval Creator; he is the Aleph Glyph, a flaming Hebrew letter, the Logos, the Phallus, the Omnipotent Father. He created Human beings as Uni-Genitalled, Male and Female. By creating humans God unleashed the potential for Change, and the virus of Time. God's design was not static, but developmental. However, the progress made by the human race had a shattering effect upon the Great Design, which manifested itself as heavenquakes. The center has become destabilised. God, dissatisfied, bored with his Angels and bewitched by Humanity, his least creation, has become a Wanderer, a traveller. He deserted his heavenly abode on April 18, 1906 and from that moment his whereabouts are unknown.

Heaven, which is almost a spitting image of San Francisco, is in peril for Catastrophe hangs over it. It is under constant threat by Progress, Movement. This threat is reflected on Humanity as well, which is hurling at neck-breaking speed towards the Secret Catastrophe, towards an apocalyptic end. The Angels, though androgynous, are unprogressive and lack imagination, thus not making them Creators and Inventors. Humanity, on the contrary, are made divine by their very imagination, a powerful faculty which has enabled them to explore, control and change the world they live in. The Angel's voice becomes foreboding as she warns Prior that Man must forsake The Open Road, for He cannot fathom the world he lives in and its Delicate Particle Logic. Man, in trying to Understand, only ends up Destroying, in trying to Advance, ends up Trampling. Mankind is described as:

"Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,
Groping terrified, misguided, over
Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain,
Hobble yourselves!"³⁵

Thus, the Angels are reactionary in that they demand an end to change and progress. Prior is uncertain as to what they desire of him. He is merely a sick, lonely man, he tells the Angel, and wants to be left alone, but the Angel, calling him "Jonah" claims he cannot escape his fate.

³⁵ Ibid, p 136.

Prior's health rapidly deteriorates. Drastic weight loss and pneumonia have taken their toll and he again finds himself hospitalized. There, burdened by an onslaught of visions, he asks Hannah if any Biblical prophet ever refused his vision, to which she replies that there is scriptural evidence of that. Though Prior insists on several occasions that he is not insane, that his visions of Angels are real, the only person who seems to believe him is Hannah, who has retained her faith. Terrified, Prior begs her to stay with him. She is a comforting presence as Prior, now sexually aroused by the approach of the angel, succumbs to his illness and his vision. He rejects the Book and engages in a wrestling match with the Angel, epitomising Jacob's struggle with the angel in the Bible, but here he manages to overpower her, which results in her surrender and in the bestowal of her blessing. Though he is taken up to heaven, Prior has retained control over his life - he can choose whether or not to return.

Prior is surprised by the appearance of Heaven, a city resembling San Francisco in the aftermath of the 1906 Quake, a ruined, deserted city with a derelict feeling to it. He finds the Angels in Emergency Council. Fully equipped with a world map, various instruments of calculation, they resemble a military staff in session. The Angels are following a broadcast of the devastating effects of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe on an old run-down radio, which is their only means to maintain surveillance over Human Mischief. The Angels are stunned by this environmental calamity, by the extent of the damage upon the soil, air, water, and people by the emitted radiation. Only the Principality of Antarctica rejoices in the fact that people will pay for what they have done to the planet. It feels no compassion or pity for the human population as it predicts a pay-off time in the future in which multitudes will die.

Prior returns the Book, saying that life, progress, change, motion, migration cannot simply stop. It is something which is animate, it is what living things do. Prior opts for life, feeling he is too young to die and that he has not really done anything yet. He wants to regain his health and the plague (AIDS) to stop. He wants life and he wants their blessing.

The Angel mourns the dissolution of the Great Design, one permeated with death, a death so plentiful that Heaven has no tears to mourn it. The world is in a state of collapse and disintegration. It is a "Not-to-be" time. Apocalypse is Descending and it will engulf the Earth in a tidal wave of Protean Fire, leaving it as clean as bone.

Prior, even though he hears this bleak prognosis of the future, still desires their blessing.

"I want more life. The desire to live is stronger in man than any pain or suffering. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's the best I can do."³⁶

On his return journey to Earth and to life, Prior chances to come across Sarah Ironson and the Rabbi engaged in a game of cards, a game of chance, of accident, in a place where all the Great Questions have been answered. Prior tells Sarah Louis is gay, while she forgives her grandson for not having visited her at her nursing home. Prior also sees Roy Cohn waist-deep in a pit. He is his old self, taking on the job of being God's counsel in a paternity suit filed by the Angels. Though he is aware of his guilt, he still wants to employ unconventional methods (bribery) to get God off the hook.

³⁶ Ibid, p 146.

Prior regains consciousness back in the hospital. His fever broken, he thanks Hannah for saving his life. Belize visits him, bringing a gift of Roy's pills. Louis appears, showing him his scars, wanting to come back to him. Prior admits he loves him, but he does not want Louis back.

The two-part play ends with an epilogue. Set in Central Park, the scene shows Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah in front of the Bethesda fountain. Louis voices cheerful optimism, praising change as he talks of the fall of the Berlin Wall and lauds the democratic socialism being built by Gorbachev and the end of the Cold War. Louis finds the Russians' leap into the unknown admirable. "That's what politics is. The world moving ahead. You can't wait around for a theory."

Prior delights in the winter day and reflects on the natural scenery. He has been living with AIDS for five years now. Hannah, too, has changed. She is more of a cosmopolitan but she maintains that "you need an idea of the world to go out into the world. You have to have a theory."

Louis embarks on a narration of the Biblical legend of Bethesda, according to which an angel landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem and a fountain shot up from the place where her foot had touched the ground. The fountain, which had had a healing effect and washed people clean of pain, ran dry with the arrival of the Romans. Hannah claims the fountain will flow again with the arrival of the Millennium when they will go there together to bathe.

The final word in the play is that of Prior, who hopes he will be alive to see the fountain in the park flowing again in the spring. His wish that all the victims of AIDS will not be forgotten but commemorated is topped off by his blessing everyone with "MORE LIFE."

THE STAGING OF **ANGELS IN AMERICA** ABROAD

Many critics have pointed to the "Americanness" of Kushner's epic play, **Angels in America**, and it is this very ingredient that has made its staging difficult abroad. The plays have fared differently in the North American, European and Australian milieu, although they have been widely recognised as heralding a renewed political theater, a theater in which "the personal is the political."

DENMARK

The play saw its first production in Denmark in the spring of 1995 in two versions, the provincial stage, Aarhus Teater, presenting Part One, and the national theater, Det Kongelige Teater, staging Part One and Two. Moving the play to a different cultural context posed a series of difficulties. In general, what seemed "controversial" in the play was not so regarded in a Nordic context. The "national themes" Kushner touches upon in the plays, such as racism, Mormonism, McCarthyism, etc., are less relevant in a country which is not faced with the same problems. Being a uni-ethnic country, racism is directed towards marginal minority groups of immigrants and refugees. Denmark, in regard to the issue of public morality - sexual, political, etc. - is rather relaxed and tolerant, with little hysteria or Puritanism. Certain historical events, such as the Cold War, McCarthyism, are distant, rather forgotten phenomena, at least for the younger generations. As for sexual

preference, homosexuality is an issue of little or no controversy. The theme of homosexuality and AIDS has been widely dealt with by Danish writers.

Consequently, traumatic issues, such as physical degradation and death, in the shape of AIDS, were given primacy, while realistic or documentary aspects, including issues of gayness, became less central because they are less controversial.

The Aarhus Teater production (premiered on February 10, 1995) of Part One was completely faithful to the text, giving a "who's who," combined with documentation about Mormons, Roy Cohn, and others, which was published in the program to diminish the problems of context. The production strictly adhered to Kushner's *Note About the Staging*, which called for a pared-down style of presentation, minimal scenery, rapid scene shifts, in which the actors also took part, along with the stage hands.

One leading principle of this production was the accentuation of the characters' relationships by a special emphasis on physical aspects - the body as a metaphor. A result of this was that the verbal dimension - the intellectual, sophisticated wit - was toned down, as was the detailed description of the external world. Thus the priority was moved from exterior and intellectual drama to interior and physical drama, largely eliminating the comedic aspect and giving the play a very serious tone.

The Royal Theater staged **Angels in America** on February 2, 1995, followed by Part Two two weeks later, while both parts were presented in a number of marathon performances lasting eight hours each. This production made some modifications to the text, tending towards a normal and realistic dialogue without too many specific American references. The program here also offered extensive documentation about McCarthyism, Mormonism, AIDS, etc. Changes of location in the play were identified by the use of actual articles such as benches, arm-chairs, tables, lamps, etc., usually in accordance with the stage directions. The locations in the split-scenes were also well defined. The style of acting was rather toned down and normalized in accordance with the adaptation of the text. The production saw Prior's story as the central one, as well as that of Louis, while Joe was shown as a tense and restrained person and Harper as a strong character. Roy and Joe, on the other hand, do not get much significance.

It is important to point out that the productions revolved around the Louis or Joe axis, depending on whose story was given primacy.

GERMANY

Kushner's play touches several nerves in German theater. Its blend of political consciousness and social criticism touches the engaged audience; its often sarcastically witty dialogue and the touching human fates promise an intelligent story. However, since the characters in the play enjoy talking and expressing themselves, the time necessary to convey the characters to the audience in German is much longer, which leads to longer playing times.

The Hamburg production, directed by Werner Schroeter and staged at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, cast a fiftyish actress to play young Harper, and a Joe, who is fifteen years her junior. The main problem with this production lay in its inability to convey the homo-eroticism, this passion that is still discriminated against. The actors could not identify with being gay, thus the characters were not convincing. Consequently, the production was more of a failure than a success.

Thomas Schulte-Michels' production in Frankfurt heavily cut the text; the performance lasted one and three quarter hours, the rest was told by the actors. Any effort at emotional illusion was killed in the light of the follow-spots and by the use of microphones which all participants made thorough use of. Here, Prior is the older man who, stricken with AIDS, fears for his considerably younger lover and from the beginning knows that he has no chance of keeping him. Joe is aware from the beginning that he is gay and he conveys it matter-of-factly in his confessional call in the night to his mother. This production, in fact, aimed at producing a strong emotional impact and arousing empathy or sympathy in the audience.

AUSTRALIA

The production of **Angels in America** by the Melbourne Theater Company in October and November of 1993 (Sidney seeing both parts produced together before New York and London) was a spectacular event, the vast majority of critics in the media enthusiastically acknowledging that **Angels** was "authorative, alluring and influential theater." This production received a swag of Melbourne's most prestigious theater awards and **Perestroika** (1994) was similarly bathed in acclamation and awards.

The play's Americanness, though the substance and subject of its greatness, was also its undoing. Though American productions are deeply ingrained within Australian society, the problems **Angels in America** deals with are specifically American: its culturality is American; its ethnicity is American; its very gaze is American. Many critics felt the need to enlighten their readers as to the identity of Roy Cohn and the Rosenbergs. The MTC program included a glossary which provided important information such as personal biographies of people referred to or characterized in the play, including the Rosenbergs, and Presidents Reagan and Bush, and defined initials like AIDS, HIV, AZT, and KS.

The stage setting effectively created the frenetic society America seems to be. It is a hyper-activity or neurosis that seemed to pervade all the characterizations; apparently a symptom of a society that has lost its way, ethically, morally and socially. This production also owed its success to the skillful portrayal of all the characters in **Angels**. The stagecraft, the immense power of the actors, and the superb direction made for an electrifying show.

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KUŠNEROV POLITIČKI TEATAR

Suzana Stefanović

U ovom radu epska drama Tonija Kušnera je sagledana u okviru tradicije američke drame. Mada u drami preovladjuju teme o homoseksualcima, ovo delo Tonija Kušnera stavlja u prvi plan i istovremeno kritički ispituje probleme koji su od suštinskog značaja za američki identitet. Kao i drugi dramski pisci pre njega – Miler, Viliams, Šepard, Mamet, Olbi – koji su razotkrili i doveli u pitanje mitove na kojima se navodno zasniva američko društvo, društvo koje doživljava propast moralnih, verskih, političkih i drugih društvenih struktura i u kome su moć, seksualnost, materijalno zadovoljenje istisnuli ljubav, saosećanje i autentično življenje, Kušner nastavlja liniju društvene kritike sa gledišta svojih likova, koji su većinom homoseksualci, koji kao simboli marginalnosti, izražavaju moralnu propast, duhovno osiromašenje i potencijal za samouništenje koji su u samoj osnovi američkog društva. U Kušnerovoj apokaliptičkoj viziji Amerika je sagledana kao zemlja koja ide ka sopstvenom sunovratu. Njegova tragična vizija amerike je donekle ublažena njegovom verom u čoveka koji kao društveno biće može da utiče na istorijski proces uglavnom kroz političko angažovanje i aktivizam. Mada su u prvom planu njegovog rada očaj i svest o čovekovoj samodestruktivnoj prirodi, u čoveku su i nada i potencijal za promene i prema tome, spas.