

ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE



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THE PLAY

It is the 1980s in New York City. Ronald Reagan is president and AIDS is a national epidemic. We meet two couples: **Joe** and **Harper** and **Prior** and **Louis**.

When Joe receives a job offer in Washington D.C., he goes home to tell his wife, Harper. Suffering from an anxiety disorder and an unhealthy relationship with the drug Valium, Harper wants to escape to a new world, but not to D.C. The relationship reaches new levels of tension as the two fight about the future and Joe continues to come to terms with who he is and what he truly wants in life.

Meanwhile, Prior reveals to Louis, his boyfriend of four years, that he has AIDS. As Prior fights to survive this illness, Louis struggles to be there for his partner.

The lives of the four New Yorkers cross paths in dreams and reality. As the couples grapple with love, loss, and death, Prior receives a startling vision: a messenger is coming. Prepare!



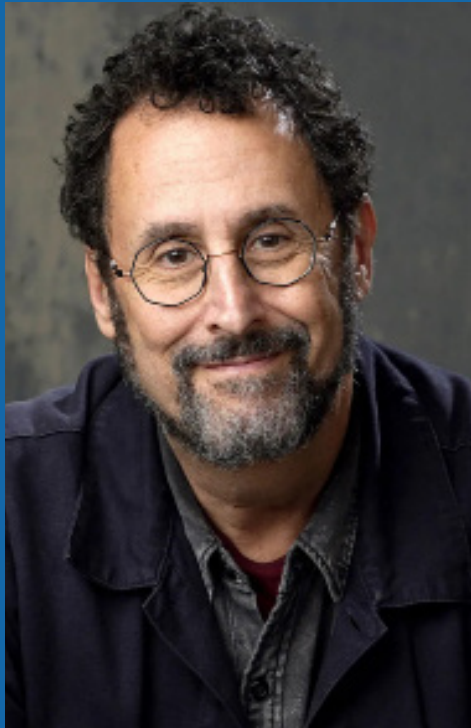
ANGELS IN AMERICA, PART ONE: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES

BY TONY KUSHNER
DIRECTED BY JÁNOS SZÁSZ
FICHANDLER STAGE | MARCH 24 – APRIL 23, 2023

Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches is sponsored by  AARP
with additional support by Patricia and David Fisher and Andrew R. Ammerman.

“I’ve thought about it for a very long time, and I still don’t understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love.”

— Belize, *Angels in America*



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT: **TONY KUSHNER**

“...as an artist, my job is more, I think, to try and describe the world as truthfully as I’m able to do it, and to get below the surface of things, to get at truths that aren’t as readily apparent.”

— Tony Kushner

Born in New York City to professional musicians, Tony Kushner was surrounded by the arts since childhood. Kushner’s father would pay him and his siblings one dollar if they memorized poems, leading to Kushner’s passion for literature and language. His interest in theater piqued when he saw his mother perform in *Death of a Salesman* and witnessed the emotional impact on the audience.

Eventually, his family moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana where there was a small, tight-knit Jewish community. Kushner credits this community with teaching him how to be self-loving and self-advocating as a Jewish person. This helped him navigate being a young, gay adult in a society that was not totally accepting.

In 1974, Kushner returned to New York for college. In 1982, he published his first play, *The Age of Assassins*. Kushner won a Tony Award for both parts of *Angels in America*; the first part also received a Pulitzer Prize. He has written four screenplays for director Steven Spielberg’s movies: *Munich*, *Lincoln*, *West Side Story*, and *The Fabelmans*, the latter for which he won a Golden Globe. Other works include the book and lyrics for the musical *Caroline, or Change* and the adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*. In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded him a National Medal of Arts. This award is the highest achievement award given to artists by the U.S. government.

“AIDS MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO TALK ABOUT GAYNESS. THE GRAVE WASN’T EVEN A CLOSET ANYMORE. ‘ANGELS IN AMERICA’ TIED [AIDS] INTO THE HUGE ARC OF THE AMERICAN STORY; THE GAY COMMUNITY WAS NO LONGER AN ISOLATED GROUP [...] IT INTRODUCED THE EPIDEMIC TO A WHOLE LOT OF PEOPLE WHO WEREN’T PAYING ATTENTION. AND FOR THOSE OF US WHO WERE, [KUSHNER] GAVE US A WHOLE NEW CONTEXT.”

— ACTIVIST AND AUTHOR, **DAVID EHRENSTEIN**

CREATING **ANGELS IN AMERICA**

In the late 1980s, Kushner was contracted by Eureka Theatre to write a 2.5-hour play. Kushner decided to write a play about his life, and what it felt like to live in 1980s New York amidst the AIDS crisis and 80s politics. The idea of the Angel came in a dream he had about a former classmate who died from AIDS. An angel entered the classmate’s room, causing the ceiling to cave in. Inspired by this dream, Kushner wrote a poem entitled “Angels in America.”

The final product was a two-part play, *Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Part Two: Perestroika*. It was produced in 1991 with a total runtime of about 7 hours.

Angels in America joined the formerly small pool of plays about the gay community, and the extremely small pool of plays about the AIDS crisis. Today, *Angels in America* is produced across the country in venues ranging from schools to professional theaters, educating audiences, raising awareness, and starting conversation on the nation’s progress, as well as its room for growth.

THEATRICALITY

The full title of the play is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. A “fantasia” is a musical composition of different styles or a fantasy. In the play, reality mixes with fantasy. Harper is visited by an imaginary travel agent, Mr. Lies. Prior and Harper appear in each other’s dreams. Roy is haunted by a ghost from his past. Why would Kushner choose to include fantastical elements in the play? Why do you think he chose Harper, Prior, and Roy for these experiences?



In 2003, the miniseries *Angels in America* premiered on HBO. Adapted by Kushner, it had 21 Emmy nominations, of which it won 11. It is available on HBO Max.

MEET THE CHARACTERS



played by
JOHN AUSTIN

JOE PITT

Joe Pitt is the Chief Clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson of the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals. He is a Republican, devout Mormon, and likes to live life by the book.



played by
DEBORAH ANN WOLL

HARPER PITT

Harper, Joe's unhappy wife, suffers from agoraphobia and is afraid to leave the house. To cope, she takes Valium, a prescription medicine used to treat anxiety, oftentimes more than recommended, which gives her severe hallucinations.



played by
SUSAN ROME

HANNAH PITT

Hannah is Joe's mother and a devout Mormon. The same actor also appears in a dream as Ethel Rosenberg (see below).



played by
BILLIE KRISHAWN

THE ANGEL

In addition to playing The Angel, whose coming is foretold to Prior, the same actor is also Prior's nurse, a real-estate saleswoman, and a woman from the South Bronx. This "double-casting" is intentional. For all the characters, notice which actors reappear, as whom, and why.



played by
NICK WESTRATE

PRIOR WALTER

Prior is the boyfriend of Louis. They have been together for four years. In the play, he reveals to Louis that he has been diagnosed with AIDS.



played by
JUSTIN WEAKS

BELIZE

Prior's insightful best friend and former lover, who is a registered nurse and retired drag queen.



played by
MICHAEL KEVIN DARNALL

LOUIS IRONSON

Louis is a gay, Jewish progressive and a highly intellectual data entry professional at the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals, where Joe works. He is in a relationship with Prior.



played by
EDWARD GERO

ROY COHN

Roy Cohn is a New York lawyer based on the real Roy Marcus Cohn.

Roy Marcus Cohn (1927-1986): Born in 1927 New York, Cohn first caught public attention with his involvement in the infamous Rosenberg trial in 1951, where he fought hard for the execution of the accused spies. Cohn's legacy is controversial. He was Jewish and gay but known for his antisemitic rhetoric and persecution of gay people. In 1984, Cohn was diagnosed as HIV-positive. At the time, he was hiding his sexuality and claimed to be sick with cancer. In 1986, Cohn died from AIDS.

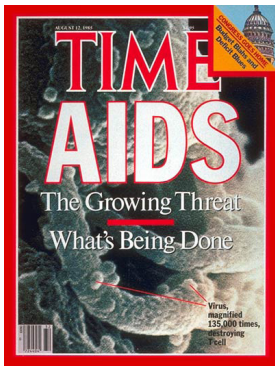
ETHEL ROSENBERG

Ethel Rosenberg (1918-1953) and her husband Julius were convicted and executed for being spies for the Soviet Union, and Roy Cohn was their prosecutor. They were the first American citizens to be executed for spying. This decision gained national attention, and public opinion was split. In the play, her ghost appears.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

“Look it. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death.”
— Prior, *Angels in America*



In the quote above, Prior is describing his first lesion, a slightly raised, dark-colored rash on the body and a symptom that typically appears once HIV has evolved to AIDS. He is one of many Americans who were infected

with HIV in the 1980s. Although it is believed that the virus was in America well before the 1980s, it was not publicly recognized in the U.S. until then. Cases appeared all over the world, the earliest known case being in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1959.

Human-immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the cells that help the body to fight infection, therefore weakening the immune system. Today, there is no cure, but it can be controlled with proper medical treatment. If not treated, it can lead to AIDS. Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is caused by HIV. It is a chronic, potentially terminal condition due to a severely weakened immune system.

This disease was first officially reported in 1981 when five young, gay men contracted a rare lung disease. Throughout the year, more cases were reported of infectious diseases arising in previously healthy gay men, giving way to labels like “the gay disease,” “gay cancer,” and “Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID),” a term used by the *New York Times*. For a long time, it was commonly misconceived that AIDS was a disease that only affected gay men, and labels such as these helped to push this harmful narrative. Hemophiliacs and

others who received blood transfusions and drug users who shared needles were also contracting HIV. In the 1980s, AIDS was almost always fatal, with the prognosis ranging from a few months to a few years.

For a while, many denied the severity of HIV, their own diagnoses (like Roy Cohn), as well as its role in AIDS, falsely assigning responsibility to people’s lifestyles and cleanliness, poor nutrition, recreational drugs, and even the anti-viral drugs used to treat HIV.

Although HIV can only be spread through specific bodily fluids like blood and genital fluids, miseducation caused a fear of those who were either HIV positive or assumed to be HIV positive. Those living with HIV/AIDS were stigmatized, as was the gay community as a whole. Many living with HIV/AIDS had to deal with losing jobs, being kicked out of apartments, being denied health care, and being shunned by family. Some children who were HIV positive were banned from attending schools. Some funeral homes refused to bury AIDS victims. Some people would not get tested or would hide the disease out of fear. Some people killed themselves as they felt the disease progress to avoid the horrific late stages of AIDS because there were few, if any, effective treatments at the time. continued ▶



DEEP DIVE



ACT UP

In 1987, gay playwright and activist Larry Kramer raised the idea of a need for an AIDS activist group at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Manhattan. Two days later, about 300 people gathered to form The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). ACT UP describes itself as “a diverse, nonpartisan group of individuals, united in anger, and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” founded “in response to social neglect, government negligence and the complacency of the medical establishment during the 1980s.” In addition to a multitude of successful protests, ACT UP paved the way for new techniques when it came to drug research, patient interaction, and social activism. One act of revolt was scattering the ashes of AIDS victims on the White House Garden in response to the lack of attention from President George H.W. Bush’s administration. The sand on stage echoes these ashes.



(continued from front)

After the Reagan administration and local governments failed to take real action, local activists took it upon themselves to lead the fight against AIDS. Over the decades, activists, like Larry Kramer, and celebrities who were HIV positive like Charlie Sheen, Billy Porter, and professional basketball player Magic Johnson helped bring awareness to fight the disease.

As of 2022, an estimated 1.2 million people are living with HIV. Because of modern-day medicine, those with HIV can live long, comfortable lives with treatment, as well as keep their partners safe from transmission.

For more information, visit: <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/about-hiv-and-aids/what-are-hiv-and-aids>

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

Joe and Harper are Mormon and Louis is Jewish. Both religions are essential to who these characters are and impact their ways of living.

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (LDS) OR MORMONISM

Mormonism is a religious branch of Christianity founded in the United States in the 1800s by Joseph Smith. Mormons believe that there is one God, and that their actions on earth will influence whether they are saved to go to heaven after death. They follow the Book of Mormon, many firmly adhering to its scriptures and practices. The LDS Church has strict rules for sexual conduct and opposes homosexual behavior.

JUDAISM

Developed by the ancient Hebrews, Judaism follows the Torah, or the Hebrew Bible. Jewish people believe that there is one God, and that He has a promise to his chosen people that they will become a great nation and will peacefully bring the world together. The play begins with a rabbi, a Jewish religious leader, performing a funeral for Louis' grandmother. Orthodox Judaism opposes homosexual behavior.

RONALD REAGAN'S PRESIDENCY



Republicans Joe and Roy are supporters of President Reagan, while Louis, a liberal democrat, disapproves of his principles.

Republican President Ronald Reagan, whose two terms spanned 1981-1989, was known for his economic policy dedicated to efforts like cutting taxes, increasing military spending, and decreasing funding of social-welfare programming.

At first, this led to a great recession, with an 11% unemployment rate and a national debt of over \$2.5 trillion, triple of what it was previously. However, the economy began to recover within the next year and continued to grow throughout his two terms.

Like Roy Cohn, Reagan opposed communism and the Soviet Union, working throughout his presidency to bring an end to both. His efforts eventually led to the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of The Cold War in 1991. Many Americans label President Reagan's terms as the longest peacetime expansion in American history, while others say that his economic policies only benefited the rich and consequently hurt the poor.

It was not until 1987 that President Reagan publicly spoke on the AIDS crisis, which by then the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated U.S. HIV cases to have risen to 562,000 in living U.S. citizens above the age of 13. Many fault President Reagan for wasting time on taking action, leading to insufficient funding during the early stages of the epidemic, as well as the widespread denial of the gravity of HIV/AIDS.

THE AIDS QUILT

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was created to remember and celebrate the lives of those who died from AIDS. The idea for the project was formed in 1985 by author and human rights activist Cleve Jones. In 1987, the Quilt had its first public displaying on the Washington D.C. National Mall as part of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay rights. During the run of *Angels in America*, Arena will host three panels of the quilt, which you can view in the lobby.



The full AIDS quilt on the National Mall made the human impact of the AIDS crisis visceral.

ACTIVITY:
TO SEE ALL 50,000
PANELS OF THE
QUILT, CHECK OUT THIS
INTERACTIVE DESIGN:
[https://www.aidsmemorial.org/
interactive-aids-quilt](https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt)



SET DESIGN



Here is a model of the set crafted by set designer Maruti Evans. Above the stage is a layer of plastic with 26 chandeliers inside. As you watch, think about what this barrier could symbolize.



THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What is the impact of stigmas around disease and identity?

2

What does love look like?

3

How does mixing fantasy and reality help to tell a story?

RESOURCES

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HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.
- Ushers are there to help you!
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

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