



# Angels in America

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In two full-length plays--Millennium Approaches and Perestroika--Kushner tells the story of a handful of people trying to make sense of the world. Prior is a man living with AIDS whose lover Louis has left him and become involved with Joe, an ex-Mormon and political conservative whose wife, Harper, is slowly having a nervous breakdown. These stories are contrasted with that of Roy Cohn (a fictional re-creation of the infamous American conservative ideologue who died of AIDS in 1986) and his attempts to remain in the closet while trying to find some sort of personal salvation in his beliefs.

## Angels in America Details

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## From Reader Review Angels in America for online ebook

### Kristen says

*And I bless you: More Life.*

Every time I try to put my feelings about this play into words, I fail to come up with anything remotely coherent. What an incredible play.

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### Sketchbook says

Kushner's overheated - and vastly overrated - opus sent me scurrying for my Yma Sumac CD, "The Voice of the Xtaby." When I want a guest to leave my apartment, I put it on with the admonition, "You must hear her 5-octave pipes!" and, shortly, I am happily alone. You too can hear Yma on YT. She trills from high soprano to basso. The music suggests tweeting birds or a volcanic eruption. Kushner, I read, thought his play might be a musical, initially, and it would have needed Yma. It still does.

Its success is a prime example of how a few mediocre dramer critics, infected w toxic fairy dust or nerve gas, can stampede the public into casting off sane reflection and start belching cheerless huzzahs. Kushner's "monumental achievement" mixes gays and Jews and Mormons (huhh?) in a series of blackout sketches, performed by usually two characters (I dont think he can write for 3 actors onstage). The AIDS crise turned him into a Writer, as it did others, so attention must be paid, as Arthur Miller rumbled. Since Kushner has *nothing to say*, he deals solely with emotions: mostly agitation and anger. A young man dying of AIDS is abandoned by his lover who becomes involved with a closeted gay Mormon who, in turn, has a shrill, pill-addicted wife. The monstrous lawyer Roy Cohn, also dying, gets a ghostly visit from the pathetic Ethel Rosenberg; amid the hysteria, and juvenile raillery, an angel descends and --- where's Yma Sumac?

Like Brecht, Kushner does not write "characters." He writes "symbols" : Evil, Affectation, Death, The Oppressed. His jabber goes on endlessly. "Our suffering teaches us solidarity; or it should," he allows. "Because Kushner has written a second-rate play...about being gay, and about AIDS, no one is going to call [it] the overwrought, coarse, posturing, formulaic mess that it is," explains a writer in the New Republic. Meantime, essayist Andrew Sullivan, who loathed the play, dismissed it as political agitprop, adding: "Gay life - and gay death - surely awaits something grander and subtler than this."

I saw an early preview c 1991, and the ranting and raging onstage put me to sleep, though I awoke when Roy Cohn (Evil) was dying in pain, which made members of the audience feel Good. I tried to see the Mike Nichols movie, and again I got the snores, especially when Meryl Streep appeared as a rabbi (or was that a bad dream?) It took me a few days to finish a play read, w long naps. The frenzy and yelping agony of *passion* in Kushner's revue sent me to Yma Sumac, the Peruvian songbird. Skip this theatrical salacacabia and give yourself up to Yma.

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### Josh says

Reading these plays aloud in a high school class created more than a few awkward moments.

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### **Stian says**

I find it exceptionally challenging to write about this play. Partly because I've never read anything like it before (a "Gay Fantasia on National Themes") and partly because I feel like the play is dealing with so many themes at once in such a short space that it becomes overwhelming.

The most explicit theme is sexuality. There are two characters in the play who are struggling to deal with the fact that they are gay. One married (with a woman) Mormon man, and another ruthless lawyer who refuses to admit that he is gay, and instead labels himself as a "heterosexual man who enjoys having sex with men." There are at least three other gay characters in the play (which means most other characters), and Joe's (the Mormon's) wife, who struggles to deal with the fact that her husband is actually gay.

It's set in 1985-1986, and AIDS is another thing the book deals with. Within the first 50 pages, two characters will have gotten the disease. Themes that naturally follow from this are things like dealing with the disease, dealing with loss; life, death, and so on and so forth.

Another major theme is politics, and perhaps especially identity politics. There are harsh criticisms in the play of right-wing nuttery when it comes to homophobia, racism and other such bigoted things.

A good play that I probably should re-read once my health is a bit better and my head is working optimally. To be honest, a lot of things eluded me here. The dialogue is at times strange too, and a lot of the political jabs seemed forced and unnecessary. All that being said I enjoyed it and would recommend it to anyone who isn't a homophobic asshole.

PS: My review and appreciation of the book may change in the coming weeks. I read this as part of my studies, and I will be having a lecture on this book soon. Obviously my understanding of the book will change and thus also my thoughts about it.

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### **Jay Shelat says**

Kushner manages to capture the tension, fear, and tragedy of the AIDS epidemic with nuance, intelligence, imagination, and magic. Angels in America is an astonishingly good read.

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### **Manda says**

I absolutely love this play. It explores the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 80s, particularly its effect on the gay community. But you don't have to be a gay man with AIDS living in 1985 to relate to it. This play reaches out on a very basic human level. It's about dealing with loss, love, sickness, regret, hope, politics, betrayal, sex, religion, death, confusion, hate...it's about facing yourself and trying to deal with what you find there.

Angels is hands down my favorite play. It's written in 2 parts: Millenium Approaches and Perestroika and is

somewhere around 7 hours when performed back-to-back.

Seriously, if I could set the curriculum for a literature class, Angels in America would be top priority. I think it's an important play and that everyone should grab a copy of it and just read the hell out of it.

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### **Kate says**

Plunged me back into 1980s NY and it was interesting to think of the parallels between then and now in politics and society's general feeling of insecurity. I'm now watching the mini series which seems very true to the script. Excellent and very moving read which I'd recommend everyone to read or go see.

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### **Avery (Book Deviant) says**

See more of my reviews on my blog the Book Deviant

Because this is written as a screenplay, I wasn't really sure how I would like it. It sounded really interesting, and so I decided that if I liked it, I would check out the HBO performance of it just so I can see it. I struggled with the beginning, being unfamiliar with the simplicity that a screenplay can give. But after a while, I felt more connected with the characters, despite not being able to hear their thoughts.

Kushner was able to convey thoughtful and diverse characters with just how they spoke and how they interacted with others. We got to know each separate character not by their thoughts on events, but on how they reacted to them (Lou reacting to Prior's illness, Joe reacting to Harper's addiction) and I found that very telling.

I thought Prior's side of the story was very . . . weird? I really didn't understand the point to the Angels, nor Prior's inclusion. It just seemed like it was weird for the sake of being weird, to draw attention rather than make sense. While I really loved the story and the overall message of it, I felt like it could have been conveyed in a better way. That didn't stop me from loving the majority of the characters (but fuck Roy) and loving how they all did their part in the story.

Final Rating: ★★★★?

Overall?

I was pleasantly surprised with how much I liked this play, so as I write this review I'm in the middle of watching the HBO performance of it (which I highly recommend!) While I wasn't the biggest fan of the fantastical portions of this play, I really enjoyed everything else.

I do have to say that I'm not the biggest fan of the agoraphobic rep. While I am not agoraphobic myself, I couldn't help but be a little put off from how Harper was showed to be "cr\*zy" and delusional.

Would I Recommend?

Yes! Although it deals with very heavy topics, I felt that there was a good balance between the heavy details and the scenes when Prior adds in a little humor.

Trigger warning for d\*ke slur, f\*ggot slur, homophobia, discussion of HIV/AIDS, abandonment, addiction,

homophobic parents, sexism, ableism, cheating, anti-Semitism, racism, and sex. Comment if you of any that I missed!

James says

Revolutionary writing about the start of the AIDS epidemic, but I wonder whether because it aims so hard, it becomes a little lost within itself. I was thinking whether this deserved 5 stars, but feel that I would need to watch this play. It is a play that needs to be performed, but is so difficult to perform.

**Brett says**

"Night flight to San Francisco; chase the moon across America. God, it's been years since I was on a plane. When we hit 35,000 feet we'll have reached the tropopause, the great belt of calm air, as close as I'll ever get to the ozone. I dreamed we were there. The plane leapt the tropopause, the safe air, and attained the outer rim, the ozone, which was ragged and torn, patches of it threadbare as old cheesecloth, and that was frightening. But I saw something that only I could see because of my astonishing ability to see such things: Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them and was repaired. Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there's a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so." wow.

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<http://naqderooz.ir/5w>

**Emma Getz says**

"This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come."

Angels in America is my favorite and absolutely the most beautiful play I have ever read for many, many reasons. First and foremost, it is a real look at a historical era and crisis so often erased in popular media. The inclusion of real historical figures like Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg only grounded this even more. At the same time, the play exists in the realm of magical realism, for lack of a better term. It pushes the boundaries between real and fantasy but grounds it in religion, truth, and life. Each character is incredibly complex and dynamic, so there are no antagonists in this story, apart from the nature of the Reagan era and AIDS itself. The dialogue is clever and humorous while being incredibly raw and heartfelt. It is heartbreakingly uplifting at the same time. The scenes are ingeniously and masterfully crafted and staged. Overall, it is a masterpiece of both theatre and literature. If I were to choose a play that EVERYONE should read, it would be this one.

## Dusty Myers says

*Angels in America* is seven hours long. You need to break the two parts up over the course of a weekend, probably. And it might be the first and it might be the only gay epic ever written. And this is why it's one of the most important books I've read. Luckily it's also one of the best.

Its project is a tough one: look at the rise of AIDS in the culture of Reagan-era New York City as experienced by three men who identify as gay, one Mormon who's oriented sexually toward other men, and Roy Cohn—who spent a lifetime in the closet and died in 1986 of complications due to AIDS. Introduce angels to the scene and try to humanize everyone no matter how villainous they might act. More than its length, *AiA* is magnificent for the honest way it goes about compassion. Hannah, the mother of the closeted Mormon, becomes at the end of the play a New Yorker in looks and all, amiable friends with a gaggle of gays without having gone all haggy about it. She is able to make this change because she knows herself, and her selfhood is as strong as her faith. She's in the end a kind of hero.

I will always remember Prior's final lines, will let them ring in my head long after I've forgotten everything else. He's talking to the audience:

"This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

"Bye now.

"You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

"And I bless you: More Life.

"The Great Work Begins."

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### **Jim Dooley says**

I keep coming back to ANGELS IN AMERICA. I first saw it on tour after its Broadway opening. Originally intended to be presented on two consecutive nights, I saw the first part on a Sunday afternoon matinee, and the second part that Sunday evening. I was mesmerized.

Is there a play that has been tinkered with more than this one? Having seen three productions and the HBO movie, none of them were exactly the same. Scenes were dropped, lines were added, and Angel acrobatics came and went. It is almost like Spielberg's CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND ... which version is the "official" one?

Regardless, it has never been less than fascinating to me. It is, indeed, a "Gay Fantasia on National themes," but to see it only as applying to the LGBT culture is selling it short. The gay perspective is its focus. The themes it explores impacts a much broader audience.

As such, it is intriguing to read this today at a time when there is so much mistrust and antagonism among Americans. A core element is that forgiveness can be extremely difficult ... not acceptance or forgetting, but forgiveness. That kind of hard forgiveness must occur if Love and Justice are ever to be reconciled. And that forgiveness is not only difficult for humans. The Angels have great difficulty with it, too.

This edition is the last published version of the play. It does point out changes that had been made including the text of two scenes that were dropped. It also provides the production history and commentary. The strength is not only the brilliant writing, but also in exploring the human spirit when situations are unbelievably horrific.

I have been moved by this play every time I've seen it or read it. It is a masterwork that I highly recommend.

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## David says

Loved this! The Roy Cohn thing was fascinating.

But I'm a fan of the Aristotelian unities in my theatre ... so it wasn't *perfect*. Wouldn't it have worked with fewer scenes, longer scenes, more dialogue? In the notes, the playwright talks about how the Angel only works with good SFX ... can you say a play is working if it needs good SFX? And why can you write scenes that directors can remove?

Loved Belize. And Meryl is fantastic in the TV show. Really ... it's through her that Part 2 works.

### **Joe at the end! Where is Joe?! Why's he not in the park?!**

Bits:

- Nixon appointed him. All the geeks are Nixon appointees.
- I don't want to move to Washington.
- Well I do.
- It's a giant cemetery, huge white graves and mausoleums everywhere.
- Well happy enough! Pretend-happy. That's better than nothing.

-Reaganite heartless macho asshole lawyers.

- Oh, that's unfair.
- What is? Heartless? Macho? Reaganite? Lawyer?
- I voted for Reagan.
- You did?
- Twice.
- Twice. Well, oh boy. A Gay Republican.
- Excuse me?
- Nothing.
- I'm not ... Forget it.
- Republican? Not Republican? Or ...
- What?
- What?
- Not gay. I'm not gay.
- Oh. Sorry. It's just...
- Yes?
- Well, sometimes you can tell from the way a person sounds that ... I mean you *sound* like a ...
- No I don't. Like what?
- Like a Republican.
- Do I? Sounds like a ...?
- What? Like a ...? Republican, or ...? Do *I*?
- Do you what?
- Sound like a ...?
- Like a ...? I'm ... confused.
- Yes.

- One ... dies at thirty, robbed of ... decades of majesty.
- You'll come back.
- If I can. I have things to take care of.
- Please do. I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.
- Well that's a stupid thing to do.

Joe:

- Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill. As long as my behaviour is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God.

- The failure to measure up hits people very hard. From such a strong desire to be good they feel very far from goodness when they fail.

- I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want, and it's like a nail, like a hot spike right through my chest, and I know I'm losing.

Belize:

- Watching him stick his head up his asshole and eat his guts over some relatively minor conundrum - it was the best show in town.

- I have to go. If I want to spend my whole life looking after white people I can get underpaid to do it.

- Do you ... You think this is, what, racist or naive or something?  
 - Well it's certainly *something*.

- All your checks bounce, Louis; you're ambivalent about everything.  
 - What's that supposed to mean?  
 - You may be dumber than shit but I refuse to believe you can't figure it out. Try.  
 - Pain's ... nothing. Pain's life.  
 - Sing it, baby.

"Americans pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the Individual: We have no system of universal health care, we don't educate our children, we can't pass sane gun control laws, we elect presidents like Reagan"

### **Sarah Tittle says**

I'm not normally a reader of plays, so I was surprised when I sped through this work, which in this edition is actually 2 plays along with a new introduction and some very entertaining notes about staging. This was, I believe, the first play to tackle head-on the AIDS crisis in New York City in the 1980s. I was living in NYC then, and virtually everyone I knew was touched by the disease in some way. And although homosexuality

was much less accepted in that era than it is now, this play is still incredibly powerful and relevant. As Kushner says in his 2012 introduction, "The passing years have been equally if not more confirming of the plays' . . . apocalyptic forebodings, which loom darker and resound more ominously for contemporary audiences and readers." He was writing that on the actual eve of the presidential election, which Obama won handily, but which seemed for many to crack open the fissure between the two Americas. And THAT is what this play is really about. There's so much duality here--life and death, black and white, WASP and Jew (is that a duality?) light and dark, forgiveness and guilt, love and hate. Kushner seemed to have presaged our country's divisiveness.

In this Trumpian era, it's very enlightening to get to know the infamous Roy Cohn as a closeted homosexual screaming with his last breath that he did not have AIDS while at the same time using his power to hoard bottles of the life-saving AZT drugs. It's powerful to remember the connection between so many New Yorkers and the immigrant ancestors who escaped religious persecution to come to America. And it's also very interesting to view Mormons and Jews as having more in common than not.

This is not a dark book, however. It is supremely hopeful. And it is really, really funny. Kushner's characters, including the angel, are so tightly drawn. There's tons of clever word play and some of the passages are super long and wordy in a Philip Roth kind of way. I saw the first play, *Millennium Approaches*, in the 1990s and I don't remember relishing the language as much as I did when reading this.

Finally, both plays are being revived on Broadway right now. If you can get a ticket, go see them! But first, read the plays, so that you won't miss any word of this wondrous, hilarious, sad and hopeful masterpiece.

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### **Nathan says**

I don't know if this play had its intended effects on me; because I was born in the 90s, HIV/AIDS has always been a reality permanently etched in the back of my mind. Because my political views lean heavily to the left, I find the recent trend of Reagan worshipping revolting. Because I live in the epicenter of Mormondom, I can poke holes in the "Mormons are the new Jews" motif that Kushner loves exploring so much. The sudden shifts Kushner is trying to articulate and rationalize have been a part of my life since birth, so there's really no way I can get into the right mindset when reading his work.

But if literature was defined solely by its ability to achieve its desired outcome, it would be infinitely duller. While the political nightmare described in *Angels in America* is still all too real, the human reality is what aches through the entire play. Kushner writes of a world apathetic to its outsiders dying alone. He writes of feeling alienated, defeated and abused in ways that will always be relevant. Early on, Prior replies to Harper's fears of Joe's infidelity that: "I would say 'fuck the truth', but usually the truth fucks you", which carried my mind through the entire play. This is a story of people trying to ignore the fact that their ideals are shattered, only to be ruined because of it.

This would have probably gotten a fifth star from me(even with that awful ending) if I hadn't read Kushner's "Notes About Political Theater" at the same time, an essay which made me aware of the play's shortcomings. Kushner writes that his goal in being a playwright is to make people aware that "[w]e are less able to see the political: in life, as in art, much energy is devoted toward blurring the political meaning of events, or even that events *have* political meaning", which I have trouble finding in *Angels*. Before reading the essay, I saw the play as a small step in the right direction; it's much more difficult to get the average person wanting to dismantle heterosexist standards if they can see the good in the people those standards knock down. And

Kushner's play makes itself remarkable for refusing to make people with HIV/AIDS disgusting or dirty. And yet he refuses to go any further than that. The nuclear family is constantly affirmed. Even though it exists in Belize and Louis, no form of intersectional queer identity is never explored to its full potential. And Roy's death upholds a positivist attitude that bad people are the only ones swallowed up by illness and pain. It's disappointing. Had Kushner turned up the heat it would have been a much more worthwhile exploration.

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### **Jana says**

I started reading the play but the dvd was due back at the library so I watched it. Then when I went back to reading, my mental images were completely taken over and I was reading what I had seen. I loved the dvd. But wish I could have experienced it unbiased by (excellent) actors and a filmed production.

The play is heartbreaking, but has humor as well. The religious aspects were fascinating to me, as one who grew up Mormon in Utah. And it is probably the best depiction of 1980s culture and AIDS one could experience.

NOTE TO SELF: I'll come back soon to give it the star treatment. Some day I may remove all stars from my reviews!

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### **Paloma Meir says**

I love this play so much, I can't even talk about it. Words, words, so many beautiful words. I'm a Tony Kushner fan girl for life.

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### **Jamie says**

I begin this review with a quote: "Things fall apart / the center cannot hold." A colleague pointed out the resonances of Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' in Kushner's 'Angels,' and I had to agree with his fantastic observation. This is a drama set in Reaganite America that images a world seemingly coming to an implosive and horrifying end. God has literally abandoned us (evidently, during the great San Francisco earthquake), and the national and historical crises alluded to--the onset of the AIDS epidemic being the most present, but also the fall of the Soviet Union, the infection of Reagan-era individualism, the legacy of the Cold War, the Rosenberg trial--profoundly intersect with the personal crises that provide the play's sometimes overwhelming sense of trauma.

Roy & Prior are each wrecked by AIDS; Harper is a pill-popping agoraphobe; there are closets galore; there are pervasive narratives of abandonment (emblematised in the one committed by God) and of comings-home; of religious doubt & the terror of change--with its corollary, the terror of stasis. There's also, as evidenced by figures like Harper, Joe, Louis, and Prior, the terror of being with--and being isolated from--other people. Roy Cohn is both a historical figure and a kind of literary master narrative--as my professor remarked, Roy reads almost as analogous to Milton's Satan. He's the most despicable character, ostensibly the villain of the play, but ultimately also becomes an intensely compelling one to follow.

With all of this said, I simply have to remark that this is, first and foremost, an absolutely magnificent work

of literature. It's beautifully written, refreshingly literary (without being as pretentious as I've been in this review), often laugh-out-loud hilarious, and emotionally affecting in a way I haven't experienced with a fictional work in a long time. Read it. Seriously, READ. IT. For your betterment as a human being, give the play a shot. It's just radiant.

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