

*In Angels in America, America is invoked both as a failed experiment and as the brightest hope for a progressive, truly egalitarian and caring society. Tony Kushner weaves reality and dreams, politics and sexual intoxication, religion, visions, ancient scholarship, and profound myth in his canvas of prolific imagination and passionate energy, but his grand vision finally excludes Mormons and all who are not part of the homosexual community.*

## ANGELS IN A MORMON GAZE OR UTOPIA, RAGE, COMMUNITAS, DREAM DIALOGUE, AND FUNHOUSE-MIRROR AESTHETICS

By Michael Evenden

A major American poet, perhaps one called a Gentile by the Latter-day Saints, sometime in the future will write their . . . story as the epic it was.

—HAROLD BLOOM  
*The American Religion*

AFTER HIGHLY PUBLICIZED performances in London, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, an internationally lauded play that sets the sexual and political ethics of the Mormon community in opposition to those of the gay liberation movement, is now showing on Broadway. In it, the Mormon (the traditional Judeo-Christian) ethic suffers a spectacular defeat. At one time, this would have been inconceivable in a mainstream cultural setting. But those days of unspoken social consensus, are fading, and now Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*—a stirring evocation of a proud gay sensibility in

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The angel visits Prior in his bedroom, reminiscent of Moroni's visit to Joseph Smith.

*In borrowing Mormonism's sacred story—angels, hidden scripture, Urim and Thummin, prophet, revelation—and parodying it, playwright Tony Kushner pays tribute to the Mormon imagination and ridicules Mormon teachings in one bold, self-contradictory stroke.*

the age of AIDS—has become one of the most highly honored plays in recent memory, winning a Pulitzer, several Tonys, and a Drama Desk award. It has been the subject of a national highbrow media blitz (in 1992–93, an interview with Kushner on National Public Radio, one in the *New Yorker*, and a PBS television special). Now it is on its way to further national exposure—a major-studio film adaptation by Robert Altman is underway, as well as a national theatre tour and regional performances in San Francisco, Seattle, Houston, and Atlanta. Add to this the play's eventual inclusion in college curricula and availability in Barnes and Noble bookstores. Kushner's work constitutes an event in the national culture; further, its use of Mormon characters and beliefs constitutes a special event for Mormons, too.

Many cloistered Church members have put off any direct confrontation with a world of increasingly varied sexual lifestyles. But for a growing number of us, it is no longer possible to avoid the sometimes bewildering task of forging

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links with our neighbors, friends, and associates who have different personal and sexual values. More and more of us live, in effect, suspended between communities. In my own case, I am deeply committed to an academic and artistic milieu and also to a church, each of which has taken an unequivocal position—diametrically opposed to the other—on the question of the legitimation of gay and lesbian sexualities. (I have friends on each side who would be appalled to learn that I feel any ambiguity on this issue. I have been, so to speak, in two closets—one Mormon, one politically liberal.)

I, therefore, must (however uncomfortably) position myself as I write about *Angels in America*. Kushner's play demands discussion by both the national and the Mormon communities. However, considering the breadth of coverage in the non-Mormon press and art establishments, the more urgent need is to generate a discussion among Latter-day Saints, which requires an unofficial forum such as SUNSTONE. So I write here as a Mormon, addressing other Mormons—any spillover to the culture at large is incidental. Yet my thoughts are informed by and responsive to a number of gay and lesbian friends and acquaintances. For that reason, I begin from what will be for many Church members an unorthodox assumption: that Kushner, while clearly an opponent of some of our traditional beliefs, may have some observations of value for us as a religious community. This assumption must, however, be complemented by an unorthodox stand regarding my liberal political sympathies: that a view of *Angels* originating within Mormonism may provide needed insights into Kushner's work as well.

## I

ROY: Baptist, Catholic?

JOE: Mormon.

ROY: Mormon. Delectable. Absolutely. Only in America.  
—*Millennium Approaches*, act 1, scene 3

**A**NGELS IN AMERICA is the umbrella title of two full-evening plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*.<sup>1</sup> *Millennium Approaches* (the title alone could startle Latter-day Saints) is the more conventional play, and in it the Church is invoked more or less peripherally, as a paradigm of the unthinking social conservatism and personal repression in the lives of three characters who happen to be LDS. At first, Mormonism is not so much demonized as made into a passing (although deepening) joke: in the play's New York setting the very existence of Mormons seems incongruous, comic. Given

the play's themes, this slighting view is unsurprising. It is also a minor issue: most audiences will register Mormonism's presence in this play, if at all, only as a sort of fanciful local color characterizing a few frustrated figures in one of several plot lines.

Mormon viewers will likely experience the play differently; they will be surprised and perhaps dismayed by its portrait of Joe Pitt, his wife Harper, and his mother Hannah. Joe, a young lawyer, married, professionally successful (he is an influential chief clerk in a federal court of appeals), a lifelong Mormon and rigidly conventional to the core, is also a tormented closet homosexual<sup>2</sup> on the verge of leaving behind the life he has known and embracing a lifestyle that he has been taught to abhor. Bottled up, awkward, and emotionally inarticulate, Joe is strongly characterized in this play and comes to resemble a type many of us have known—a desolate, duty-haunted soul, frightened of his own emotions and a stranger to spontaneity. In the course of *Millennium Approaches*, ineluctably worn down by a battle he cannot win, Joe experimentally leaves Harper and begins an affair with Louis, a gay co-worker who is himself haunted by guilt for abandoning his lover, Prior, who is dying of AIDS.

By now, the story of a Church member "coming out" of our community should not shock us in itself; however saddening, it is hardly news. Nor is the Pitt family story unimaginable to us: although they don't constitute a representative sample, most of us will recognize these characters, including Hannah (a dry and condemning Salt Lake widow) and Harper (a valium-addicted agoraphobic). In part, then, *Angels in America* tells a story we may have had to face within our shared lives, but now, thanks to this play, will see depicted more publicly: the failure of Mormon community, family, and theology to sustain and hold on to some of its own. But beyond this discomfort lies a greater one: our faith's fleeting characterization as an irrelevant joke, a sinkhole of dead values.

## II

JOE: (*He puts his hand on one side of Louis's face. He holds it there.*) I am going to hell for doing this.

LOUIS: Big deal. You think it could be any worse than New York city?

—*Millennium Approaches*, act 3, scene 7

**I**T is important to put the Mormon themes in context: *Millennium Approaches* has bigger fish to fry than Mormon-baiting. Joe Pitt's story is only one of several interlinked

explorations of homophobia and failed ethics in what Kushner sees as hypocritical, deplorable inequities, and naked power-grabbing—an American ethos that, under the guise of law, crushes helpless minorities. If the play has a single center, it is not the emotionally blocked, clumsy Joe, but Prior, the gallant, witty, and keenly suffering AIDS patient. AIDS is at the center of this dramatic universe, and consequently the desolation and mad hopes of the dying shape the play's world, so shot through with the fear that not only homosexuality but humanity itself, its waywardness, resourcefulness, kindness, and capacity for survival, is in critical condition, especially in the play's Reaganite 1980s. Consequently, the play is haunted by the kind of death-threats that we now see levelled at whole communities: AIDS, the deteriorating ozone, the death of earlier generations from various old countries. These themes are reflected as if in distorting mirrors: through Harper's sad-funny, valium-induced hallucinations (which begin to incorporate other characters' dreams, in boundary-crossing theatrical absurdity); through Hannah's comic, stonewalling impatience with the messy humanity surrounding her on a visit to New York; through Joe's halting, anguished language and imagery of consuming guilt; through Louis's mad, eloquent bitterness as he finds himself unable to brave the sight of Prior's degeneration; and, perhaps most importantly, through Joe's increasingly compromising professional involvement with the fascinating, diabolical Roy Cohn.

Based on the historical Cohn—high-profile lawyer, government insider, power-broker, former assistant to anti-communist Joseph McCarthy, and dishonest participant in the prosecution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—Cohn is Kushner's demonic and charming antagonist, the virtuosic villain of the piece. As the moral opposite to Prior's victimized innocence, Cohn is a lodestar of personal, political, and spiritual monstrosity, compounded of political ambition, obsessive manipulation, megalomania, dishonor, self-hatred, and (crucially) closeted homosexuality. Throughout both plays Cohn and



Joe Pitt, a Mormon homosexual who is leaving his wife, beginning an affair with Louis, a gay Jew who is abandoning his AIDS-infected lover.

*In Angels in America, playwright Tony Kushner makes an eccentric tour through Mormonism with scattered phrases and references but conveys no Mormon culture or belief system beyond the apparatuses of shame.*

certain characters and themes are woven from one scene to the next in the redigued bodies and voices of the cast. Eeriness and growing reinforcement of ideas are skillfully merged as Kushner leaps over the influences on his writing (among them Bertolt Brecht, Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond) to arrive at a style that feels distinctly his own, a kind of funhouse-mirror aesthetic in which every kind of human relation might be ironized and put to question.

In the process, the play also becomes a kind of distorting mirror for Mormons, where we examine ourselves in a depiction both familiar and unrecognizable. Certainly any desire to view the play through comfortable and familiar assumptions—for example, to experience Joe's coming out as a tragedy—would contradict Kushner's depiction. For Joe, de-

Prior are dying of AIDS, but Cohn, unwilling to risk his political and social power by identifying with a vilified minority ("Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Does this sound like me. . .?"), dies desperately (and futilely) trying to disguise his condition as liver cancer and himself as an honest lawyer.

These accumulated elements give the play's movement a morally and politically engaged complexity. Kushner is an impassioned, deft, and often brilliant writer, and his vivid language, wide-ranging imagination, shrewd characterization, and undeniable theatrical wit can produce a kind of wonder that at its fullest I associate with only the most skillful and intelligent dramatists—Ibsen, say, or Schiller. When has an American playwright so directly and skillfully attacked the personal, political, and spiritual in a single work, let alone interrelated them with such relaxed, spontaneous ingenuity? It is an art of interrelations; much of the cumulative richness and power of the play is built on canny strategies of mirroring, doubling, blending, and contrasting plots and characters: Kushner splits the stage for simultaneous scenes, echoes lines from one scene to another, assigns multiple roles to a small company (eight actors handle twenty parts) so that echoes of

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spite his pathos, is no tragic protagonist, but often a comic figure, naive, pompous, awkward, and easily embarrassed in his painful, adolescent groping toward sexual self-expression. In this play, then, Joe's movement away from what the playwright considers an unauthentic marriage and a religion of cold personal repression is no decline, but only one of many difficult, inevitable, and possibly hopeful first steps—or leaps—into the unknown that Kushner demands of his characters, and implicitly of his audience as well. Here, hope lies in the unpredictable, the unexpected, the moment of experiment.

Hence, the moral essence of the play: the painful necessity of progressing beyond what Kushner sees as such unworkable social inheritances as majoritarian politics, organized religion, Old-World ethnic identity, governmental ideologies, and the unfulfilled dream of the American family. Above all, it presents an impassioned diatribe against the blindness and self-deceptions of those who long for the ideal, the inhumanly abstract virtues (nationalism, familism, authority-worship, conservatism of various kinds), at the expense of the immediate, the real, the personal and eccentric life in and around all of us.

The second and more daring play, *Perestroika*, is introduced by an aging and feeble "Bolshevik" mourning the "beautiful theory" of communism; he represents all who have invested their faith in deadly, unworkable schemes that have proved oppressive and have finally broken down. Traditions, in this world, are traps; the only hope is in *perestroika*—the dismantling of unworkable and inhumane systems of governance, behavior, and belief.

This insight is inflected, again, through the distorting mirrors of different characters' perspectives: through Harper's inconsolable sorrow ("People who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining . . . beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiralling apart . . . everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way . . ."); through Prior's campy comedy in the face of death (when he announces to Louis that he has contracted AIDS, he manages a riff of cliché-haunted puns on the disruptive word "lesion"—lesionnaire, foreign lesion, lesionnaire's disease, my troubles are lesion); and through a few eruptions of political rage and hope, in which America is invoked both as a failed experiment and as the promise of a progressive, truly egalitarian and caring society. Here, incorporating the rich melancholy and humor that weave through the two nights of performance, is the unmistakable conviction that fuels this epic work, insisting that if our nation is to become honorable and fit for new life, it must rise above its own cruel history and inadequate traditions.

## III

Poets, or at least the strongest among them, . . . can only read themselves. For them, to be judicious is to be weak, and to compare, exactly and fairly, is not to be elect.

—HAROLD BLOOM, *The Anxiety of Influence*

FOR themes this large, the playwright needs a sizable frame of reference, and it is not surprising to find Kushner in effect reinterpreting the cosmos onstage, interweaving reality and dreams, politics and sensual intoxication, or that he appropriates religion, visions, ancient scholarship, and profound myth to give him a canvas worthy of his prolific imagination and passionate energy. What we see here is a created world, not our own but a striking misprision—that is, a strong writer's creative rewriting of inherited texts.<sup>3</sup>

Misprision is especially evident in Kushner's wrestling with religion. *Millennium Approaches* is encased in religious book-ends, Jewish and Mormon (Kushner often seems to conflate the two, at least as sources of religious imagery). The play begins with the funeral oration of a rabbi over an immigrant woman (Louis's grandmother) who has died in obscurity and silence. ("She was the last of the Mohicans, this one was. Pretty soon . . . all the old will be dead.") From the first, then, religious heritage is on its last legs. We then notice scattered references to Mormons, a phrase here and there to suggest that Kushner has burrowed into the subject—yet it is very clear, to Mormons at least, that he has made his own eccentric tour through our culture, creating his own engaging misreading, where wrong notes and minor omissions abound. Thus Mormonism is oddly reduced to fit Kushner's needs: temple garments are referred to (and even shown), but no bishops; there are abstract and guilt-inducing beliefs but no home or visiting teachers; memories of Bible pictures but no recall of Bible or Book of Mormon stories or figures, no functional families, no rituals of counseling or blessing, no mention of priesthood, no callings, responsibilities, or social or religious activities for these struggling lifetime members. In short there is no Mormon culture, and for that matter, no Mormon belief system beyond the apparatuses of shame. (In a central omission, it is never clear from the text whether Joe is personally religious—we only learn that he prays and is self-hating.) The treatment of Mormonism is therefore a tourist's invention, rather quaint and smart-alecky, like Jean Baudrillard's jabs at the Church visitors' centers and the like in his freewheeling *America*. (Kushner's comic undercutting of visitors' center dioramas in *Perestroika*—Harper runs away from home to live in the pio-

neer display, hoarding vending-machine food, and having dreams in which the mannequins get up and leave the exhibit—has, I must admit, finally and completely destroyed the dioramas for me, my equivocal feelings for them now reduced to mortified hilarity.)

So the first evening of *Angels in America* is, in both quirky and predictable ways, the sort of unsympathetic reading of Mormonism one might expect from Kushner, a gay activist and (one infers) an agnostic. But there is more to come, a second religious scene, positioned as an answering bookend to the first: at the end of *Millennium Approaches*, a series of visionary hints given to the possibly hallucinating Prior culminates in a *coup de théâtre* that shocks:



Prim Mormon Hannah being forced by circumstance to assist the ill Prior at the LDS visitors' center.

*Hannah's speech about Joseph Smith is the only place in the plays where Kushner doesn't overturn a conviction of institutional religion. Still, in the end, Hannah is the only Mormon redeemed precisely because her growth has taken her out of her Mormon identity.*

*(There is a creaking and a groaning from the bedroom ceiling, which rains plaster dust. The bedside light flickers wildly. Then there is a great blaze of triumphal music, heralding. The sky turns an extraordinary harsh, cold, pale blue, then a rich brilliant warm golden color, then a hot, bilious green, and then finally a spectacular royal purple.)*

PRIOR (an awestruck whisper): God Almighty . . . Very Steven Spielberg.

*(A sound, like a plummeting meteor, tears down from very, very far above the earth, hurtling at an incredible velocity towards the bedroom; the light seems to be sucked out of the room as the projectile approaches; as the room reaches darkness, we hear a terrifying CRASH as something immense strikes earth; the whole building shudders and a part of the bedroom ceiling, lots of plaster and lathe and wiring, crashes to the floor. And then in a shower of unearthly white light; spreading great opalescent grey-silver wings, the Angel descends into the room and floats above the bed.)*

ANGEL: Greetings, Prophet; The Great Work begins: The Messenger has arrived.

*(Blackout. End of Part One.)*

No reviewer I have read has mentioned (probably because none of them has known or particularly cared) that this scene,

and the one that continues it at the start of *Perestroika* (a scene in which the Angel unearths for Prior a book of hidden scripture, to be translated through a Urim and Thummim—which Prior dons—all with the promise of new dispensation of prophecy), directly parodies the founding myth of the LDS church. It amounts, in fact, to a kind of elaborate, obscene burlesque of the First Vision and Moroni's subsequent visits to the young Joseph Smith's bedside. It also lays the ground for the higher philosophical and moral stakes of the second evening of the overarching *Angels in America*; in borrowing our sacred story, Kushner seems both to pay tribute to the Mormon imagination and to ridicule our teachings in one bold, self-contradictory stroke.

For those intimately familiar with the First Vision as a mythic event, the ironic reversals in Kushner's funhouse-mirror view of our theology become overwhelming: where Joseph Smith taught that he diligently sought an answer to a prayer, and received his vision only after much soul-searching and petitioning of the Almighty, Kushner's Angel forces herself on Prior, who responds to the vision, in vaudeville blackout timing, with "Go away!" The Angel's visits are erotically charged, presaged for Prior by unexpected erections and often accompanied, comically, by spontaneous orgasm (the angel does not touch him, by the way, and is referred to as "she," but is apparently multi-gendered, having (although not displaying) eight vaginas and four penises). Whereas Joseph's vision was the start of a new religious tradition and a Moses-like trek to a new promised land, all fueled by the promise of ongoing revelation and communal progression into knowledge of the divine, Prior's vision commands all mortals to stop all movement, to cease the development of new ideas and new forms of social order—Kushner's angels, in short, are bureaucratic but not imaginative (managers but not leaders, in Hugh Nibley's terms) and any earthly intellectual or spiritual adventure threatens their heavens; and centrally, where Joseph's vision began with the arrival of God the Father and led to a changed view of human potential, Kushner's God, the ultimate dysfunctional patriarch, has withdrawn from the world and from heaven; the angels are hoping to lure the old recluse back by preventing any future

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imaginative, social, or political growth on earth, confining all to stasis and tradition, with their new scripture, the "Anti-Migratory Epistle."

Any Mormons who attend *Perestroika* will probably view it with a degree of dismay (even amused horror), since for us it can only be a kind of unexpected comic blasphemy on familiar themes. Much later, at the climax of *Perestroika*, a desperately ailing Prior travels to heaven—ludicrously dressed as Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*—and gives back the book of new scripture in exactly the words one might expect of a disinterested missionary contact: "I . . . I want to return this. Thank you . . . for sharing it with me, but I don't want to keep it."<sup>4</sup> The rejection of the book is crucial to the larger meanings of the play: the message of the unwanted scripture, a closed book, is closure itself, the very essence of conservatism and the refusal of life; to reject it is to reject moral and spiritual death. Rejecting the sublime by recourse to the obscene and ridiculous, the playwright takes enormous risks with this strategy and I believe has a kind of heady success. But perhaps only chagrined Mormons will fully get his very elaborate joke.

#### IV

HARPER: I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual.

HARPER: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR: In my church we don't believe in Mormons.

—*Millennium Approaches*, act 1, scene 7

**I**f *Millennium Approaches* is a play of bad news and unravellings (it traces Prior and Cohn's early stages of AIDS illness and the dissolution of the two couples, one Mormon, one gay, in a series of painful conversations, miscommunications, and dreams), then *Perestroika* is an evening of visions and desperate hope. As Cohn comes closer to death he is haunted by the sardonic ghost of Ethel Rosenberg; Prior has visions, and strikes up an unlikely friendship with Joe's mother, Hannah, who prefers the outlandish Prior to her disappointing son and daughter-in-law; Louis, disgusted by Joe's politics and particularly his record of abetting federal circuit court decisions that discriminate against gays and lesbians, throws Joe out and returns to Prior; Harper, after trying to live in a visitors' center diorama (the most artificial and lifeless embodiment of Mormonism), emerges and begins the hard task of pulling herself and her life together without Joe; and Harper's meditation on the ozone hole begins and ends the play—first as a vision of the dissolution of God's protections, and finally as a space for faith and a kind of committed memory of human suffering:

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 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. No loss is irrevocable. See? Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so.

All that remains after this consoling final speech is a brief, epiphanic epilogue that has become the center of much critical attention (indeed, perhaps a disproportionate amount of attention, as if it were the essence of the work), a scene in which the lives of several characters extend into a pleasant future (January 1990). Prior, Louis, their friend Belize, a gay African-American man and sometime drag-queen, and Hannah, the Salt Lake widow, sit in the winter sun in Central Park on the rim of the Bethesda Fountain, enjoying the pleasures of intimate and informal community—intelligent conversation, reading, political debate, and a hope for a non-sectarian miracle that will cure Prior (who has already asked the angels for "more life," and has survived five years with AIDS). It is Hannah (described in the stage directions as "noticeably different—she looks like a New Yorker, and she is reading *The New York Times*") who promises to take Prior to the original Bethesda fountain in Jerusalem when the Millennium comes, to bathe him and all of the gathered friends clean—implicitly a vision of miraculous cure for all tribulation. In Prior's survival, in Hannah's benediction, in the sweet, familiar rhythms of conversation, *Angels in America* ends in *communitas*, a sense of religious beneficence in a secular gathering.

Most critics have been eager to write about this epilogue as a sunny and expansive affirmation of community in a large, inclusive sense. John Lahr of the *New Yorker* writes that "'Perestroika' ends by celebrating community . . . the community of concern is extended by the author to the human family, not just the gay world."<sup>5</sup> Hal Gelb of the *Nation* sees the ending as marked by "tolerance not just for gays but for Mormons too."<sup>6</sup> Kushner has echoed them in interviews, focusing, I

infer, particularly on his ambivalent offering of a kind of final acceptance to Cohn: in a preceding scene, Belize insists that Louis recite Kaddish over Cohn's dead body while Belize steals Cohn's stash of AZT for other, needier patients; Louis recites the prayer haltingly, in unison with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, thus acknowledging Cohn's suffering as an AIDS patient—but ending the prayer with “You sonofabitch.” “The question I'm trying to ask is how broad is a community's embrace,” Kushner has said. “How wide does it reach?”<sup>7</sup>

But a Mormon might ask, “What's wrong with this picture?” The answer raises an issue that has been obscured in an understandable wash of critical enthusiasm. For as it happens, this poignant epilogue, like the play it follows, is considerably less inclusive than many have taken it to be—in fact, it may be just as exclusive as Kushner has implicitly accused the LDS church of being. As Louis Marin notes in *Utopiques: jeux d'espace*, it is the tendency of imagined Utopias to reproduce the contradictions they were set up to escape. If Marin is right, then it might be worthwhile to upend this quasi-religious ending, in order to seek out any rigidities, orthodoxy, idealism, and refusal of *communitas* that may linger there in this epilogue's hard-won Utopian space, a space that shuts out not just the homophobia, but in a larger sense the rigidities, the orthodoxies, the dead-at-heart idealist, categorical, and judgmental thinking of organized religion (specifically Mormonism). A subaltern reading of this material through a Mormon gaze may reveal something of the limits of vision and of representation that are the givens of Kushner's polemical misprision.

If one takes an inventory of the characters onstage in this epilogue, it is interesting to note who has been left out, or left behind five years ago with the rest of the action: Joe, at last sight ambiguous about his gayness and still politically unenlightened; Harper, too, is gone, self-exiled. That's two principal figures associated with Mormonism out of the picture; Hannah, the final one, is there, but the accumulations of dialogue, character interaction, and final stage directions strongly suggest that by this point Hannah has grown out of her Mormon identity.<sup>8</sup> A limited vision of tolerance, then: accepting Mormons so long as they agree to leave their religion behind and stop being Mormon. This Utopian collective of



Louis and Prior in the epilogue at Bethesda Fountain in Central Park.

*What's wrong with the play's ending message?  
Kushner's climactic vision of a tolerant  
community accepts Mormons only so long  
as they agree to leave their religion behind.*

carefully worked out by Kushner, admits no heterosexuals to the space of the play unless they are played in drag (as are a government insider, a doctor, a rabbi, the ghost of a Jewish grandmother [her scene omitted on Broadway], and—in an earlier draft that may resemble the three pre-Broadway productions—in three middle-level Mormon leaders).<sup>10</sup> Even allowing that characters without a defined gay or lesbian sexuality are peripheral to this story (which may be Kushner's witty revenge for the mainstream marginalization and non-representation of gays, an overdue reversal I enjoy), something is nevertheless clearly skewed here; something seems unrepresentable, unthinkable within the project of this play. Here, in a stylistic trope that cultural theorists could elaborate on endlessly, heterosexuality (particularly that of men) is a masquerade, while gayness is an unproblematic construct, an essential, integrated identity.<sup>11</sup>

On reflection, then, it becomes clear that the only community this play can truly imagine and deal with is that created by gay men and those loyal to them (the latter value is what ultimately saves Hannah, granting her a place in the final tableau). Hence the implicit exclusion of straight men, (who I guess are assumed to be apathetic or enemies to the gay community). Thus the characters disloyal to gayness—Harper, who has impeded Joe, Joe, who has physically beaten Louis in a quarrel over Joe's politics, and Cohn, who has refused to acknowledge his sexuality—are barred from the epiphany. Even more tellingly, everyone left on stage at the end has the distinction of having proven loyal to Prior, who is not just a gay man but an AIDS patient—one who suffers undeservingly for his sexuality.

friendship (an important imaginative site for gays and lesbians and for Mormons, too)<sup>9</sup> must exclude difference: consciously or not, Kushner apes the Church's way of accepting homosexuals only when they repudiate their difference, their sexuality.

In fact, despite its epic range, *Angels in America* features other striking omissions: what the play excludes throughout its seven hours is anyone outside the gay and lesbian community (although wives and mothers of gay men are given a temporary reprieve until they sort themselves out), except in distanced and parodic representation—the doubling of actors for supporting characters, specified and

These, finally, are the only meaningful relations in Kushner's imagined world, seemingly the only moral experiences available—in an existence marked by AIDS (and Kushner evokes no non-gay AIDS patients), loyalty to afflicted gay men is the one fixed moral criterion. From this, the play's moral logic becomes unmistakable: in parallel scenes, we are given to understand that Louis, for abandoning Prior—because Prior is a suffering gay man—is nearly unredeemable; but Joe, in leaving his helpless and irrational wife—apparently because she is a suffering straight woman—is only taking a necessary, if painful, step into the right community. Kushner exacts stern punishments according to this tendentious ethic: Louis must be beaten up<sup>12</sup> before he can enter even a portion of Prior's good graces (Prior, sitting in judgment, refuses to let Louis move back in with him even then); and Joe, who never follows his tentative coming out with a full embrace of a gay lifestyle and apposite liberal politics, is left in limbo, apparently not yet fit for *communitas*. Yet Cohn, of all people (as Kushner has said), is seen as marginally redeemable in the end, despite his continuing moral grotesquery. Why? Because he is part of the community of AIDS patients. A virus, insofar as it creates community, covers a multitude of sins.

Therefore, if Kushner sincerely reaches for an ethical vision of America, at points his reach exceeds his grasp. The play remains confined to the predictable limits of—to borrow his subtitle—"A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." The principal theme is the imperative of opening our hearts to people with AIDS—no small or unworthy theme, of course; AIDS is one of the crucial issues of our time, and Kushner is to be praised for portraying it with such compelling urgency and for insisting on the right to challenge any governmental, religious, or personal status quo that flatly rejects the sick and the dying. But, granting all this, the critics have nevertheless misrepresented Kushner's achievement—and the sternness of his central vision—in a kind of sentimental approbation: the very strength of Kushner's writing comes in part from its refusal of touchy-feely universality, its clear advocacy of a militant minority position.

The widely touted ecumenical embrace that critics have sensed in the play's conclusion is misguided; clearly, at a fundamental level, Kushner is not reconciliatory with those he considers the enemies of his people. This is a work written in anger by a writer of delicacy who nevertheless wishes not to hobble himself with delicate distinctions. All forms of good and evil finally coalesce into a few images, and in his concluding moral judgments of who is on the side of life and who on that of death, Kushner paints with a very broad brush. Perhaps, then, mainstream critics were wrong to expect anything as meager as tolerance from Kushner in the first place. In misreading this ending as inclusive—rather than still militant and unforgiving of everyone Kushner finds lacking—straight critics have simply invented a kinder, gentler Tony Kushner, out of their own need not to be condemned, a desire to feel includable, even forgivable, in a gay and lesbian Elysium. Kushner's anger seems to be too much for the mainstream to face.

## V

JOE: Do you want to be pure or do you want to be effective? Choose.

—*Perestroika*, act 1, scene 7

THIS does not mean, however, that the Kushner whose concerns extend beyond the immediate issues of gay community and the AIDS crisis is simply a critics' fiction: Kushner himself—by sending ideas to resonate through religious, ethnic, and political-ideological registers—touches on a nationwide hunger for a larger vision, one free of tendentious and combative self-positioning, but still grounded in concrete (and therefore limited, positional) experience. The leap from self-understanding to understanding the other is a tough transition to make in America and in much of the rest of the world these days. Commendably, Kushner seems to be struggling with it: the long and tortuous process of rewriting *Perestroika* for Broadway led to some interesting, even tantalizing new moves in the text that hint at a broader view, not least in the softening or excising certain derisive Mormon references. For instance, there is no longer a comic scene of fussy regional general authorities, played in drag, complaining about Harper's invasion of the visitor's center; Prior no longer identifies the visiting angel as the one Joseph Smith mis-identified as Moroni. More importantly, Hannah's discontentment with her life and the Church, while not excised, is certainly lessened: references to Hannah's unsatisfying marriage, her disgust with sex, her memory of a Salt Lake friend who burned down her house in revenge for marital rape, have all been taken away, as has the hint of Hannah's emerging lesbian interest in a female nurse who comes on to her. More, beyond these omissions, Kushner has managed to add a remarkable passage that suggests for the first time that Hannah may actually retain some personal religious conviction (a rare commodity in this play):

HANNAH: One hundred and seventy years ago, which is recent, an angel of God appeared to Joseph Smith in upstate New York, not far from here. People have visions.

PRIOR: But that's preposterous, that's . . .

HANNAH: It's not polite to call other people's beliefs preposterous. He had great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

This moment is unique in *Angels in America*—perhaps the only time that a conviction of an institutionally supported belief is not immediately overturned by the playwright's mockery. Sitting in the theater, I found Hannah's speech surprising and poignantly out-of-place in a work that made little concession to religious faith. This is not to say that Kushner has managed to turn his play into something genuinely sympathetic to traditional religions—this touching, incongruous moment (which my personal response surely granted disproportionate importance) is minor compared to the overall sym-



bolic movement of Prior's story throughout *Perestroika*: our hero goes to heaven to reject the finished text of codified religion, to reject God as a neglectful and abusive father, and this central story outweighs any momentary concessions to religious sensibilities.

Still, this unintegrated gesture of religious tolerance (that is, tolerance of religion) is interesting, at least as a sign of an unfinished question in the playwright's mind. After all, the writing of *Angels in America* is still, in some sense, unfinished: Kushner, presumably working on the screenplay of the coming film, has mentioned a desire to write more scripts involving some of these characters; even the process of staging the play in various parts of the country under different directors may modestly "rewrite" it through the mediation of new interpretations.<sup>13</sup> The easy stereotypicality of the play's original depiction of Mormons (Kushner's most obvious failure of imaginative work) may not be the final word we will hear from Kushner on this subject.

## VI

PRIOR [to Hannah]: I wish you would be more true to your demographic profile. Life is confusing enough.  
—*Perestroika*, act 5, scene 7

HAVING held a critical mirror up to Kushner, however, it would be dishonest (classic mote/beam blindness) not to take the possibly more painful step of examining ourselves again, to study our distorted image in a flawed, but still arguably great, play and see what we can learn. Kushner's examination of Mormon beliefs will lead to difficult questions from the surrounding culture; as a people, we had best prepare.<sup>14</sup> The hardest query will be: "Why does the Church condemn same-sex relations?" The issue is a stirring one for many, and even asking the question might provoke a fundamental outrage; however, I believe we should be ready and able to discuss our tradition, with outsiders and with each other. Here I can only suggest one beginning to that discussion.

For those who, like me, would like to see the Church learn from Kushner's misrepresentation, and who would also like to be able to communicate across the resentment and enmity with which the activist gay and lesbian community regards a faith like ours, there is another possible Elysium glimpsed in *Angels in America*. Early in *Millennium Approaches*, a fantastic and logically inexplicable scene develops between Harper and Prior, in an odd blending of her hallucination and his dream; unexpectedly, a fantasy space is created where the naive Mormon and the dying drag queen can meet and come to know each other in some sort of exchange. ("Threshold of revelation" is a phrase they toss back and forth in this unreal arena.) If we had access to some such space, some level playing field of ideas where the Mormon and gay communities could meet in peace and enter into dialogue,<sup>15</sup> here is what I would most like to make clear: that our two opposed communities share a certain rhetoric, a claim of inner necessity from which

one's identity and community may be derived. This shared rhetoric might be the key to some sort of mutual respect or tolerance. But in order for that tolerance to exist, each community would need to make a boundary-crossing acknowledgment of the validity of more than one source of personal and community identity. Mormons, on the one hand, would have to admit—late in the day—that homosexuality is to some degree spontaneous, not a matter of simple choice, and further that for some, perhaps for many, these unbidden sexual feelings are experienced as fundamental to one's personal makeup, inherent and important to one's essential being. But the assumptions that underlie this belief implicitly beg a further question: is sexuality the only source of identity? Or, is it always the most important one? I would contend that for many of us, religion operates at the same level of unbidden self-discovery: when religious experiences exceed routine and habit, they can be real spiritual events, capable of grounding a life and generating an identity.

This idea of, so to speak, *spiritual* orientation, and its consequences—religious identity and community—are what is missing, unimagined in the dark psyches of Kushner's pseudo-Mormons. Many in the gay and lesbian community want to believe that no refusal of the imperatives of sexual desire can succeed, just as many Mormons would dearly love to believe that no personal testimony of the gospel can be defeated by unmet sexual need. We should each acknowledge that by now we know better, and seek to extend understanding to all, without insisting or oversimplifying the complexity of these issues.<sup>16</sup> For to limit the possibilities of identity, of selfhood, surely this is the real path to orthodoxies and repressions. Kushner seems to assume gay orthodoxies by the handful, and thus produces stereotypes, like the sex-starved, denial-ridden, bitter and utterly lonely Mormons he dreams up. Conversely, most Mormons have had to struggle to think beyond received stereotypes of gays and lesbians. Now that we are on the receiving end of Kushner's brilliant and off-and-on stereotyping, I hope we can respond intelligently and generously, more chastened than defensive, taking the high road of self-examination and open-hearted humility, warned against our own temptation to yield to the comforts of unexamined prejudice. ☞

## NOTES

1. I have, perhaps, oversimplified the discussion so far by conflating the two parts under the single title; while Kushner clearly intends the two halves to constitute a single, expansive work, much of the initial critical furor over *Angels* actually centered on the first part, *Millennium Approaches*, which opened in New York in the spring of 1993, joined the following fall by its conclusion, *Perestroika*. *Millennium Approaches* took the Pulitzer (*Perestroika* lost to Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*); my impression (subjective) is that the general enthusiasm over the second play is a bit muted. Since it is *Perestroika* that particularly wrestles with Mormonism, this complication should be noted.

2. The term "homosexual" is historically problematic, as many gay activists find it redolent of the debatable social construction of same-sex desire that developed with the term's actual emergence in the nineteenth century. For this article, I have accepted Kushner's frequent use of the term, both in the play and elsewhere in print, as license to use it without necessarily incorporating unwanted assumptions. One provocative discussion of the issue may be found in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester and Wheatsheaf,

1991), 31–34.

3. The term misprision is a foundational one for the literary critic Harold Bloom, quoted above, whom Kushner credits as a source for one idea in the play; Bloom has written his own mocking/admiring misprision of Mormonism in *The American Religion*—one wonders if Kushner knew this book.

4. Kushner was once the recipient of a copy of the Book of Mormon from a kid he met as a summer camp counselor. He became interested in Mormons, he says, as a “people of the Book”—rigid and more reverent about texts than life. Without that young member’s effort, the Mormon passages of *Angels* might not exist—would-be missionaries take heed!

5. John Lahr, “Beyond Nelly,” *New Yorker* (23 November 1992): 129–30.

6. Hal Gelb, “Theater,” *Nation* (22 February 1993): 247.

7. Quoted by Lahr, “Beyond Nelly,” 129.

8. The suggestion arises from a pattern of details that in Kushner’s weighted universe seem to have symbolic importance: restless and cynical in Salt Lake, skeptical about the Saints, and untouched by love on almost any level, Hannah has, by the end of the combined play, chosen to leave Salt Lake for New York indefinitely (and geographical place and migration do count for a good deal in this play), has changed her look so that Kushner can insist that she seems changed at last, newly adjusted to a secular space (with Salt Lake representing, in this play, a separate Mormon civilization, nothing less). Certainly the religious vision she imparts at the end is very foreign to Mormon tradition.

Further, there were, in the earliest version of *Perestroika* I read, not only more gibes from Hannah about Mormon culture, but also hints of Hannah’s slowly coming to understand herself as a lesbian: in that version, she admitted to preferring the company of women, then confessed that she always hated sex with her husband, then—in a passage that seems to me an egregiously tasteless joke on any number of grounds, and a joke that is preserved in the Broadway version—at the end of one scene, the angel (played, after all, by an actress) kisses her on the mouth and gives Hannah “an enormous orgasm.” (“I have never had a dream like that one,” she remarked later in the earlier draft, inviting audience smirks.) After this, again in the earlier version, she showed an interest in a young lesbian who came on to her, played by the same actress who played the angel. A lesbian relationship, we might well have inferred, may be in her future; and when next we see her, years later, she seems “changed.” There was never any open statement about Hannah’s sexuality—but certainly we were meant, in the earlier version, to register at least a hint.

So is Hannah still a Mormon at the end of the play? Obviously, the Mormon compulsion to distinguish between faithful and unfaithful or former members—a compulsion I fall into here—seems unimportant to Kushner and to the reviewers I’ve read, but its absence leads to a question: when is a Mormon not a Mormon?, and further, what is a Mormon to Tony Kushner? The play’s answers leave much to be desired.

9. See Peter M. Nardi, “That’s What Friends Are For: Friends As Family in the Gay and Lesbian Community,” *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience*, ed. Ken Plummer (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). I know of no comparable studies of Mormon friendship-networks, although it seems to me a matter ready for investigation, particularly in our age of consolidated meetings and compensatory study-groups. Certainly I would not have been able to finish this article without the encouragement and suggestions of a loose collective of Mormon friends.

10. I am oversimplifying; sometimes actors strongly identified with gay characters play straight roles briefly, as was the case with one of the Mormon managers; but the effect may be more or less the same, and it is certainly a calculated defamiliarizing effect that Kushner intends here in any case.

11. The cast lists of the London production of *Angels* actually lists a ninth actor who took on some of these peripheral roles; nevertheless the (frequently cross-gender) doubling I refer to is specified by Kushner in the published version of the script.

12. In the earlier version, Louis was actually required to beat himself up with a frying pan as a formal penance for abandoning the dying Prior.

13. One wonders how the symbolic geography of the play will read in touring or regional productions: Kushner uses Hannah’s journey from Salt Lake City to New York as a forced pilgrimage from the dark ages into enlightenment—but how many of us in the rest of the country accept New York as the pinnacle of advanced civilization? Kushner’s stage direction in the epilogue, dictating that Hannah should demonstrate her new cultivation by reading the *New York Times*, seems faintly, unintentionally ridiculous. My own fantasy is that some production will let Hannah appear in the final scene reading the Bible—carrying an older kind of wisdom with her as she branches out into new learning, moving ahead without leaving all of her old identity behind.

14. There are other plays besides Kushner’s that challenge the Church’s position on homosexuality. In the 1980s, *Emmett: A One-Mormon Show* by Emmett Foster, about growing up gay in the Church, played at the New York Shakespeare Festival and has been made selectively available by the author/actor on videotape. A play I encountered as a reader for the Seattle Repertory Theater—I’ve forgotten the title—included a struggling adolescent boy who had joined the Church and was confused by its condemnation of his homosexual feelings.

15. My categories may be simplistic; when I delivered a preliminary version of this review essay at the 1994 Washington D.C. Sunstone Symposium, the presence of at least one member of Affirmation (whose members attempt to live in both gay and Mormon communities at once) made the “we” and “they” of my argument dry up in my mouth. This opposition is here employed as a conceptual frame, and may be read as if under erasure.

16. Some in the fields of gay and lesbian studies and activism are beginning to recognize the narrowness of certain simplistic visions of sexuality and identity. See, for example, Kobena Mercer, “Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 65, and an excellent “theoretical rumination” in Foucauldian terms by Ed Cohen, in “Who Are ‘We’?: Gay ‘Identity’ as Political (E)motion,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991). As always, such meditations on group identity and difference raise issues the indirectly impact on Mormon identity and internal differences as well.



## CATCHING LIGHT

On summer evenings in Indiana  
we kids ran through the neighborhood  
catching lightning bugs.

Most we put in bottles to  
light up the night.

They ran over each other in the jars,  
flickering their tiny lights on and off.

The biggest kids ran a contest  
to see who could catch the most.

It took a lot to make a satisfactory light.

At six or eight we no longer believed  
our mothers’ tales of fairy folk  
with lanterns in the night.

We could see they were just  
flying bugs, with no feelings and  
no purpose but to give us games.

The older kids taught the younger  
how to catch the tails of the  
bugs just as they lit,  
and pinch them off aflame.

If we smeared the little lanterns up our  
arms and over our faces  
they left streaks of light.

Then in the final darkness,  
we ran screaming through the yards,  
like lighted demons.

—DONNA R. CHENEY