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'Angels in America' joins the ranks of literary classics

Tony Kushner's play about AIDS is now seen as defining work of '90s

BY PATRICK HEALY

"Angels in America," Tony Kushner's fever dream about Ronald Reagan and AIDS, love and abandonment, has emerged as the most influential American play of the last two decades. Now in its first New York revival since an acclaimed Broadway run in 1993-94, the play has survived controversy and its own unusual, unruly structure to become a mainstay of the literary canon, produced on college campuses and taught in classrooms with the same reverence as "Death of a Salesman" and "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Sprawling and audacious — seven hours long, with scenes set in heaven and with an angel crashing through the set to bless an AIDS-stricken man as a prophet — "Angels" has even endured commercially. An HBO mini-series adaptation with Meryl Streep and Al Pacino swept the Emmys in 2004. And while the New York revival by the Signature Theater Company that opened Thursday is no surprise for this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, theaters in Bloomington, Indiana; Denver; Salt Lake City, Utah; and elsewhere are also mounting the play.

That a play involving a gay Mormon and his drug-addicted wife is being produced without public fuss a short distance north of the headquarters of the Mormon Church in Utah's capital underscores how the United States has changed since "Angels" reached Broadway.

A firm belief in cultural change is embedded within the play itself. As the main character, Prior, says in "Angels," "The world only spins forward."

Written by Mr. Kushner in his 30s during the heat of the AIDS crisis, "Angels" unfolds in two parts, "Millennium Approaches" and "Perestroika." The play follows Prior, a gay New Yorker who discovers the purple AIDS lesion on his arm one day in 1985, and the swelter of humanity and history around him: a lover who leaves, Mormons in crisis, a closeted

McCarthyite (the real-life Roy Cohn) and his enemy the formidable ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, and a host of angels who help end the story on a note of optimism.

"Angels" has inspired subsequent playwrights like Doug Wright ("I Am My Own Wife"), who calls it "one of the most stringently moral plays to come along in a long time," and Lynn Nottage, the author of "Ruined."

"Tony emboldened me and others to try to tell epic stories and truths through the marginal voices in history," said Ms. Nottage, who won the Pulitzer in 2009 for "Ruined," a play about prostitutes in war-torn Congo. "He taught writers how to handle political content without being didactic and to handle difficult subjects without putting people to sleep."

But the play has also roused a new generation of writers, many of whom grew up after President Reagan left office and in a time when H.I.V. and AIDS had become chronic, not fatal.

Bradley Cherna, a 22-year-old aspiring playwright, recalled finding a copy of "Angels" in his Florida library in the eighth grade and said he was "blown away page after page" by the ambition

and sweep of the story.

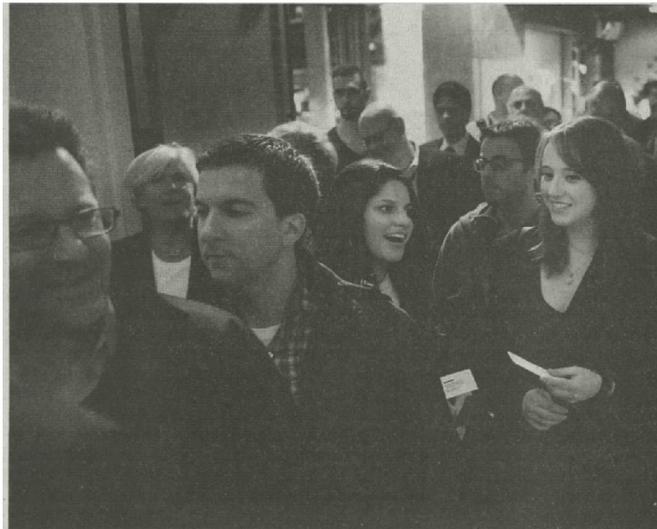
"I guess everyone longs at some point for an angel to crash through their roof to provide some sort of hope and help," said Mr. Cherna, who is gay and now lives in Brooklyn.

By now there have been hundreds of professional productions worldwide. But the reach of "Angels" across the United States came with furious protest at first. The depiction of gay sex and AIDS-related symptoms triggered picketing or condemnation for productions in Michigan, Florida, Texas and elsewhere.

The New York revival is part of Signature's full season devoted to Mr. Kushner's work. Sold out even before opening, the production offers theatergoers a chance to assess "Angels" at a distance from the crisis that inspired it.

"Like 'Death of a Salesman' and 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,' the play stakes a claim to a particular time and became the defining play of its generation," said Joe Mantello, who played Louis, the boyfriend who abandons Prior, on Broadway. "Revivals like this one make us ask what happened to our sense of responsibility to one another."

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SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Theatergoers outside the revival of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" at the Signature Theater in New York. It opened Thursday and is set to run through Feb. 20.