

The chop and change

Tony Kushner's *Perestroika* is not just about chaos, it's engulfed by it. Gerard Raymond reports



Over the last two months, Tony Kushner has had people on both sides of the Atlantic in a panic. *Perestroika* — the second part of his much acclaimed series *Angels in America* — opens in London tonight and in New York on Tuesday. But only two weeks ago, the National Theatre was still receiving new scenes from him by fax and on Broadway, previews were being cancelled to accommodate his rewrites. Now, though, it looks as if all the chaos may pay off. Optimists are even beginning to look forward to Part 3...

Angels, which opened with *Millennium Approaches* at the National last year, explores two failing relationships — one gay and one straight — against a broad social, ideological and religious canvas. It won Kushner the *Evening Standard* and Critics Circle awards in England, and the Pulitzer prize and Tony Award in America. It made him a name to be reckoned with.

Last week, the 37-year-old playwright appeared to be thriving in a maelstrom of activity. He was attending rehearsals on Broadway and working on the new material daily. He was putting together a benefit for the Irish Lesbian and Gay Association. His phone rang constantly. Any minute, you expected him to scream: "I wish I was an octopus" like the frenzied Roy Cohn simultaneously juggling

calls from a dozen phones in *Millennium Approaches*.

"It's a nightmare," cried Kushner, pointing to a sheaf of faxes on a cluttered desk in his Manhattan apartment. "I just got 10 pages from the National and we are now trying to figure out what their script looks like and what ours looks like." Declan Donnellan, who directs the British production, says the recurring spectacle of the fax machine "belching forth scenes" and his "long and somewhat agonised" transatlantic conversations with Kushner have prompted many jokes at their expense around the National.

Kushner and Donnellan have fuelled plenty of backstage gossip before. During the rehearsals for *Millennium* in December 1991, which Kushner attended, they developed what Donnellan calls a "volatile" working relationship. The atmosphere is said to have been tense. This time, with Kushner physically absent, matters have been more complicated still. Because the actors were so far into rehearsal when some of the changes arrived, Donnellan decided to retain certain scenes in their original form. "Though the maddening thing," he said, "is that so many of the rewrites are much better. Many of the changes are cuts aimed at tightening the focus of the play."

Perestroika premiered in Los Angeles last November, and Kushner had planned to revise it over the year. But the rave reviews hailing the play as a landmark threw him. He developed a bad back and couldn't write. "It was totally psychosomatic," he explained. "The moment I forced myself to get back to my desk and write, it stopped hurting."

The chaos and frenzy, however, is entirely appropriate for a play whose very title means change and restructure. Although *Perestroika* has the same characters as *Millennium* and begins where the first play



Top left: Tony Kushner. Above: Joseph Mydell, Stephen Dill

place in the world in the three years since Kushner wrote its first draft. "In the heady years of 1990," Kushner said, "the world really seemed to have miraculously transformed — the Berlin Wall had come down, we thought it was the end of the Right and the end of the Republicans. We thought we had arrived at the Millennium. And of course we hadn't." For Kushner, *Millennium* is his last play of the Reagan era and *Perestroika* his first play of the new era.

He also feels that the play was greatly influenced by the sudden death of his mother six

walk out on their lovers, causing great pain both to themselves and to their partners. By the end of Part 2, these four people are still grieving, but they have found ways to cope with their loss. The tone throughout is more contemplative and sombre.

Nevertheless, Donnellan believes it to be the funnier of the two plays; Kushner himself calls *Perestroika* a comedy. Kushner's camp sensibility and desire to entertain is always in evidence; moods change constantly — Prior introduces Hannah as "my ex-lover's lover's Mormon

ge of daily life



ane in *Millennium Approaches*. Above right: Nancy Crane, Stephen Dillane in *Perestroika* Photos: John Haynes, Stuart Morris

takes a turn for the worse. Kushner is nuttiest and most cerebral in the celestial tribunal scene — he quotes shamelessly from *The Wizard of Oz*, but on the other hand propounds a theory explaining that chaos is an inherent part of being human.

Angels in America is subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" and it is a play about America, albeit envisaged from a very distinct viewpoint. Kushner believes it's his focus on national, rather than gay, themes that has contributed to the play's impact in America. "I have tremendously compli-

says Kushner, "and *Angels* is my way of thinking about it."

Ironically, this play about people undergoing changes in a world in flux has significantly transformed Kushner's own life. He was raised in Louisiana, and has lived in New York since the early Seventies, doing various theatre jobs while writing in his spare time. Until *Angels*, he was best known for an imaginative adaptation of Corneille's *The Illusion*, which is very popular in regional theatres around the US, and *A Bright Room Called Day*, an attempt to link the last days of the Weimar Republic

in 1990, he has been able to support himself entirely through his writing.

The money has also brought him considerable material comfort. He is currently decorating his new apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a fancy flat with a river view. You see his photograph in the social columns of newspapers and glossy magazines. His recently acquired celebrity carries a certain clout — he writes Op Ed pieces for the *New York Times*, and is able to persuade influential people to join him for celebrity benefits.

Meanwhile, the *Angels* jug-

the world and Kushner is shortly to begin work on the screenplay — which Robert Altman is slated to direct. And some time in the next few years Kushner will write Part 3. "I have finally given up pretending that this little group of characters is not important to me," he said. The third play will be called *Representative Men*, but he wouldn't tell me the plot. Grinning mischievously he said, "It will be fun to do at least 20 of them, to check in with these people every three or four years!"

□ *'Millennium Approaches'* and *'Perestroika'* are in rep at the Na-