

The young director realized the play's immense theatricality on a budget.

Theater



ANGELS ON HIGH: Michael Mayer's grand outing.

Angels Approaches

TONY AND I have been girlfriends since 1982," exclaims Michael Mayer, flashing a big grin. The 34-year-old director, who hits the big time this fall with the national tour of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (now at Chicago's Royal George Theatre), dates his relationship with the playwright back to graduate student days at New York University. "I felt like I had met a soul sister," he says.

Kushner enrolled in NYU's directing program during Mayer's second year in the school's acting program. The two came out together, professionally, in an NYU production of Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, in which Mayer was directed by Kushner. After graduating, they worked the night shift as telephone operators at the UN Plaza Hotel. "We would listen to

Dr. Ruth Sunday nights on the radio, and play out our secretary fantasies."

Mayer's current assignment is linked to his association with Kushner and NYU. Mayer directed a student workshop production of *Perestroika*, the second part of Kushner's play, there in May 1993, coinciding with the opening of George C. Wolfe's acclaimed production of *Millennium Approaches* (the first part of *Angels*) on Broadway. Impressed by the way Mayer realized the play's immense theatricality on a minuscule budget, the commercial producers of Kushner's epic asked him to adapt Wolfe's production for the road. Then, discovering that the Broadway production was too elaborate and expensive for the projected 15-city tour, they asked Mayer to create his own version.

The touring *Angels* will be "simple and beautiful," Mayer promises. Confident that the play will fly on the wings

of its "exuberant theatrics," he aims to realize its magical effects through the inventive use of actors and props rather than high-tech machinery. To get the play across to the diverse audiences nationwide, Mayer will rely on his own voice as "a Jewish homosexual leftist." Coincidentally, that description also fits his friend, the playwright. "I know Tony's voice and his theatrical taste intimately," says Mayer.

In light of his new success, Mayer is starry-eyed about his "embarrassment of riches." Borrowing the Hebrew word *dayenu* (it would have been sufficient) from the Passover seder liturgy, he says, "If I get to make a living in the theater—*dayenu*. If I get to make a living in the theater and direct *Perestroika* at NYU—*dayenu*. If I get to direct *Angels in America* anywhere—*dayenu*." But to direct the national tour, that, he says, is "mind-boggling and completely humbling."

—GERARD RAYMOND

Gerard Raymond also contributes to *Premiere* and *The Washington Post*.