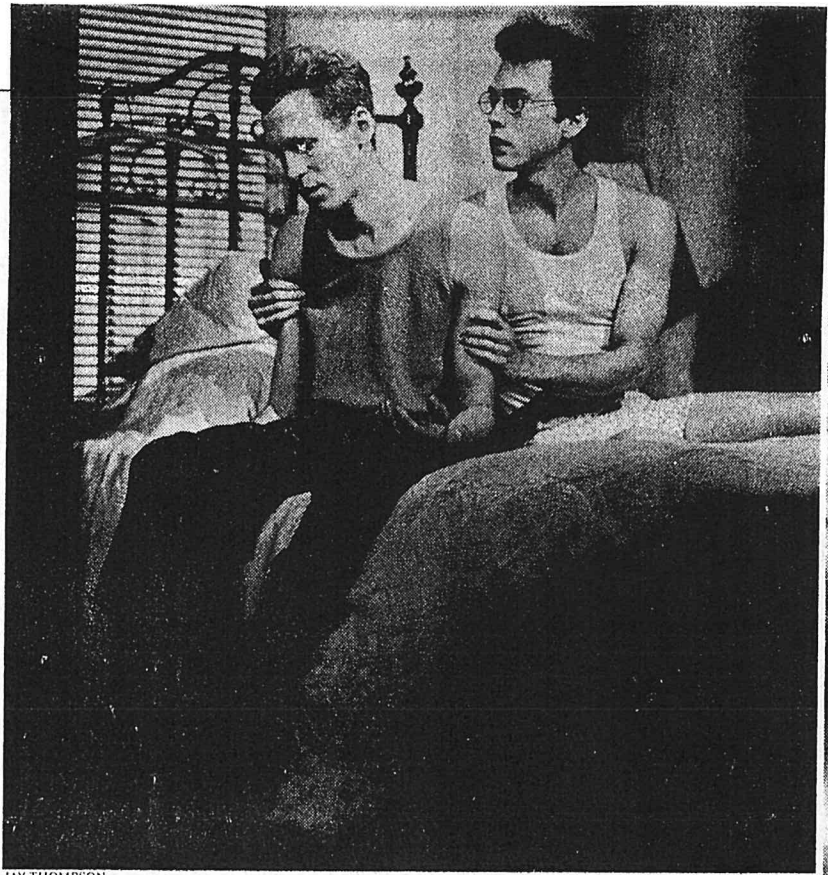


Stephen Spinella (left) and John Matthews in a scene from *Millennium Approaches*, a play by Tony Kushner (far right) that examines gay issues in contemporary American life.



JAY THOMPSON

A Political Animal

Playwright Tony Kushner Puts the Issues Of Gay People Center Stage

by GERARD RAYMOND

"I am a playwright who is gay," says Tony Kushner. "I happen to be a socialist, a leftist, and a Jewish playwright as well."

Kushner is also a playwright whose career has taken a very successful turn. His play *Millennium Approaches*, the first part of a larger work titled *Angels in America*, was a critical success at Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum this summer. The two-evening epic, which is subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, will be seen in its entirety next spring at the Eureka Theater in San Francisco. Additionally, Kushner's adaptation of *The Illusion*, a 17th-century comedy by Pierre Corneille, was recently optioned by Universal Pictures, and an earlier play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, will be produced this November by the Public Theater in New York.

A few critics complained that *Millennium Approaches* was about gay issues rather than "national themes." But Kushner's ambitious vision for *Angels in America* is precisely to remind us that gay issues are national or even international issues.

As demonstrated in his work, the 34-year-old playwright has strong political convictions. Kushner grew up in Lake Charles, La., where he felt "doubly mar-

ginalized" being a Jew as well as gay. The only sign of gay life in the small, conservative town, he recalls, was the sad plight of older men who would periodically get arrested at the local bus station. Kushner says the civil rights movement of the '60s and political activism in the South had a great impact on his family. His political and sexual awakening continued at Columbia University, where he was a student in the mid '70s, and Kushner has continued to live in New York City since that time.

CHAOS AND CONTRADICTIONS

One of the key characters in *Millennium Approaches* is the infamous right-wing closeted gay lawyer Roy Cohn. "I have always been fascinated with him," says Kushner, recalling the panel in the Names Project AIDS quilt that someone made for Cohn. "It was wonderfully succinct—black with the words COWARD, BULLY, VICTIM."

Kushner is intrigued by the way politically conservative gay men like Cohn and Terry Dolan managed to live "such titanic contradictions." He explains, "I am fascinated that being a lawyer meant so much to Cohn. He had no respect for the specifics of the law, but the moment he was dis-

barred he seemed to let go, and he died five days later. Cohn was completely comfortable living a life of absolute chaos from start to finish. And I think being gay made it possible for him to do this."

In a memorable speech in *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner attempts to capture Cohn's twisted reasoning. When his doctor tells him that he has AIDS, Cohn retorts that he is not a homosexual, pointing out that homosexuals are people with zero clout. "Homosexuals are men who in 15 years of trying cannot get a pissant anti-discrimination bill through city council. . . . I have sex with men, but unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House, and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. . . . *What* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. . . . Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys."

Cohn is one of eight major characters in *Millennium Approaches*, many of whom are gay, whose paths cross in curious ways during the course of a year. "The characters are grouped into what appear to be fairly compact communities, given their ideology, sexual preference, religious or political



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affiliation," he explains. Although everyone seems neatly arranged, it becomes apparent as the play progresses that the combinations just don't work. "People are not giving each other what they need. These communities fall apart and disintegrate."

The playwright feels we are heading into a period of polarization that is going to be very scary but which is going to make our choices very clear. "The fog of the last ten years of the Reagan era—this kind of expensively produced pageant of entirely false harmony and really sinister nostalgia—is gone, and people are waking up to the ugly reality. It is a very tumultuous time."

TAKING ACTION

In the epilogue of the current draft of *Pere-stroika*, the second part of *Angels*, two characters are present at the beginnings of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Kushner describes himself as a "minor participant" of the activist group, saying he goes to demonstrations and gets arrested when it is something he feels strongly about. "ACT UP is the first real coalition between gay men and lesbians since Stonewall," he says. "The fact that the group is so politically astute has everything

to do with the presence of women in the group. ACT UP is incredibly smart about issues of power—who has it, why those certain people have it, and why others don't."

ACT UP has clearly influenced Kushner's attitude about AIDS. At the end of *Millennium Approaches*, an angel appears to one of the characters who has AIDS. While some audiences have interpreted the angel as a symbol of death, Kushner is emphatic that the person with AIDS does not die.

"I am alarmed that a lot of the work being produced still reflects an earlier consciousness about AIDS—that it is either a quick end or a slow decline," he explains. "We are really moving into a completely new phase of the epidemic, and I think it is important to stop doing plays about AIDS that are elegies. It's no longer absolutely a terminal disease. It is now a chronic illness that can be contained with the proper attention."

While Kushner acknowledges that his play works better when there are gay men in the audience ("You get three times as much laughter"), he has not written the play exclusively for gay audiences. At the same time, he has not made any attempt to sanitize the play for straight audiences.

"I very much wanted to shove gay sexuality into the noses of the straight audience," the playwright says. "One of the points of the play is that it is through sexuality—through an erotic impulse—that we saved ourselves. Without it, the community would cease to exist, and then where would we be?"

Kushner also does not shy away from presenting AIDS in all its ugliness. "I wanted to have people shitting onstage. I wanted to show the disease—lesions and everything. It is really important that we not throw a blanket on it. In the scene when the character with AIDS gets examined, we had little iron-on lesions for the actor. It is very hard to watch."

DOLLARS AND SENSE

In the homophobic climate of the arts today, it may come as a surprise to learn that the Eureka Theater received a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant of \$57,000 three years ago for the *Angels in America* project. "The NEA has played an important role in my career," admits Kushner, noting that this is his third grant from the NEA.

The playwright disagrees with those who now advise that artists should refuse NEA grants. "I think that is contemptible. It is advice coming from those who can afford to refuse the money. We won't gain anything politically by doing that. It assumes that we operate on a good-faith relationship with the federal government, and we don't. I think the point is to organize and change the restrictive language attached to the grants rather than further impoverish the artist."

This year, for the first time, Kushner can support himself as a writer. The dual success of *The Illusion* (both as a play and a potential movie) and *Millennium Approaches* has also brought him a higher public profile. "Given my politics, I thought I would never be able to make a real living as a playwright," he admits. "I am very encouraged by what is happening. I just have to adjust to it, find a nice boyfriend, and settle down!"

Following his movie deal, Kushner is being courted by television. Still, he reports, being openly gay has never become an issue for him in Hollywood. "So far, I haven't run into any overt homophobia. I have worn ACT UP T-shirts to meetings with movie executives, and they all very diligently went trundling off to see *Millennium*. I was very relieved when they called back saying they were really *thrilled* by it.

"Anybody looking at my plays would conjecture that a gay man had written them," he grins. "I think I am a theatrical playwright, and theatricality is very gay." ■