

TheaterWeek

December 20, 1993/\$3.00 \$4.00 CANADA

AN INTERVIEW WITH
**Tony
Kushner**

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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Q & A With Tony Kushner

*The prize-winning playwright on Perestroika
and where he's going from here*

BY GERARD RAYMOND

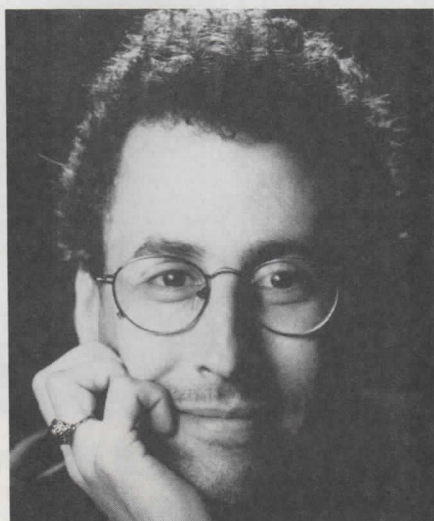
Unless you've just landed on this planet, you have heard of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The hugely entertaining, theatrically exhilarating, and thought-provoking two-part epic is hailed as a cultural touchstone for this decade. Subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning saga explores two disintegrating relationships—one gay and one straight—against a broad sexual, ideological, social, and religious canvas.

The first part of *Angels, Millennium Approaches*, was received ecstatically when it opened on Broadway this May and won the season's Tony Award for Best Play. But throughout this summer, gossip spread about the frantic rewrites of part two, *Perestroika*; there was concern that it could not possibly live up to the expectations set by *Millennium*. Then, last month *Perestroika* opened to reviews that excelled even those for the first part. The most talked about and most expensive play in Broadway history appears set for a healthy run. Both parts are currently running in repertory at the Walter Kerr Theater.

I talked with playwright Tony Kushner early in November. In the two weeks prior to the interview, several previews of *Perestroika* had been scrapped and the play's opening had been postponed twice.

TheaterWeek: Cancelled previews, delayed opening night, last minute rewrites—what happened?

Tony Kushner: As far back as a year ago last spring, when we were doing the first really big workshop of *Perestroika* at



Tony Kushner photographed by Jay Thompson.

the [Mark] Taper [Forum] in Los Angeles, we decided to turn it into a three-act play. But that was a terrible mistake because unconsciously, it created the expectation that the play would be *Millennium Approaches* redone. So I spent this summer terrified of making the commitment to going back. I mean, the commercial move would have been to make the play even shorter than it was in L.A., but that simply isn't physically possible. There are four major characters in *Millennium*, whereas in *Perestroika* there are eight, and they all have equal weight.

For most people who have a successful play, there's an aftermath—you bask or you freak out or you do what Tennessee Williams did, you have your eyes operated on. You [have the time] to adjust and figure out who you are, and spend a year or two or three writing your next play. If I had actually started writing *Perestroika* af-

ter what happened last spring [the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award], I would certainly never have written the play at all, or at least not for many years. In fact, my back went out and I could barely write my name. I had to force myself to ignore it and start rewriting, and literally, the minute I did that, it stopped hurting. It was totally psychosomatic. But it managed to keep me away from the desk for a good, solid month, and that caused the cancelled previews.

So did you eventually go back to the first version of *Perestroika*?

I have come to believe to a certain degree in the wisdom of first drafts. You have to be very careful about rewriting. I think *Perestroika* got cleaned excessively at the Taper. I did go back to the first draft a great deal, but then I also found a good deal of new stuff. There is a whole new arc for Louis and Joe, which I am very happy about. They aren't just shrieking at each other anymore and I think that adds some emotional weight to the play. That's a discovery in the last month and a half. What I guess I am happiest about is that every single draft—and this is the seventh draft of *Perestroika*—has added something that I consider to be of great importance to the play. Yes, I made a mistake, but it has been an organic growth process. I don't think that the play could be [what it is], without that amount of time. I also see how the events of my life in the last three years have really fed the play.

What were the those events which shaped *Perestroika*?

The primary thing was my mother dying in August 1990. I was writing the first

act and "Epistle" at Sundance, right after the L.A. workshop in 1990, when I got the call that she was sick. That stopped work on the play until the spring of the following year. When I sit and listen to *Perestroika* now, I realize it has so much about loss—how to deal with it and how not to be deformed by losing. That is just exactly the question *Millennium* poses, so it is not an arbitrary direction to have gone in, but it is very clear to me now that *Perestroika* is all about my mother. I finished the play on my parents' anniversary in 1991, which always was a big day for the both of them. Also, I have lost a couple of friends to AIDS recently

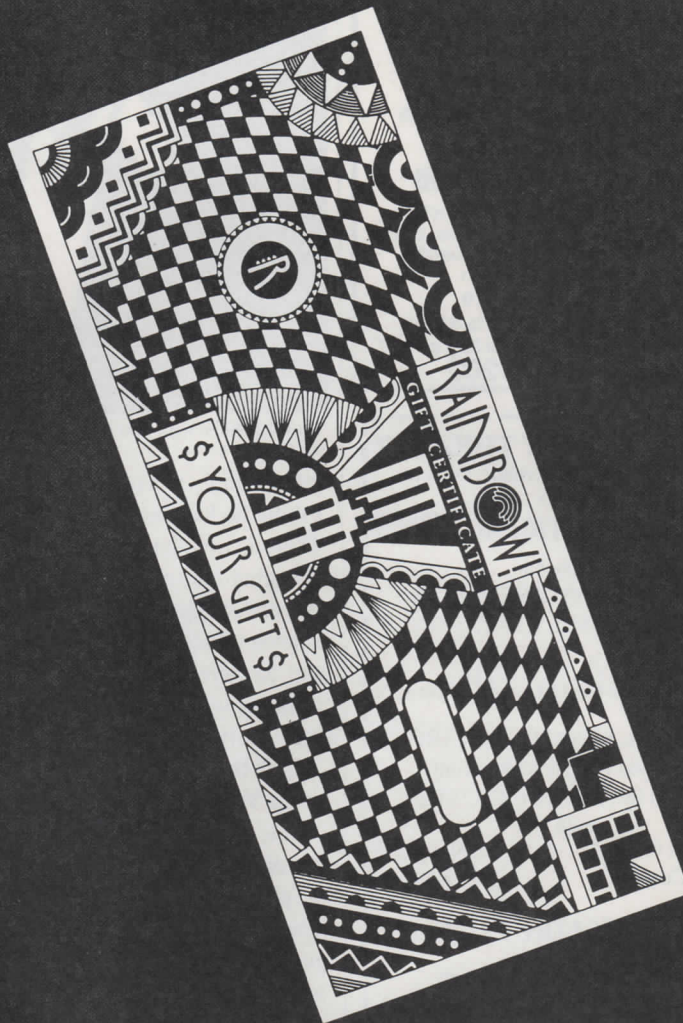
When you started writing *Angels*, you didn't have that personal contact with AIDS, did you?

Right. When I started *Millennium*, I was not very deeply enmeshed in that whole process. Since then, I have lost people who were very important to me and last year, a very close friend of mine discovered that he was positive. There is something new about these late cases. You almost can go for days now and believe that it isn't happening, and then you just get yanked back into 1988 again, when everybody was getting sick. It is frightening, but it isn't the same. I mean, on a personal level, the loss is terrible, but in a certain sense we have gotten so used to it and, to some extent, it's become a part of daily life.

Do you feel the title *Perestroika* is out of date today? When you started writing the play, that word was connected to Gorbachev's rise to power and the restructuring of the old Soviet Union.

History has made the word even more appropriate. For a week in the summer, when I was having my *Perestroika* breakdown, I decided I was going to change the title to *Bethesda*, or *Bethesda's Fountain*, and then I thought that was ridiculous. *Perestroika* has, in fact, become a more perfect model or metaphor for human change than it was in the heady days of 1990 when the world really seemed to have miraculously transformed. The Berlin Wall came down; we thought it was the end of the right, the end of the Republicans, and we had arrived at the Millennium. And, of course, we hadn't. In his book *Perestroika*, which he wrote in 1987, Gorbachev says—and I think he meant this—that the ultimate goal of perestroika is not to succeed with change necessarily—although that would be wonderful—but

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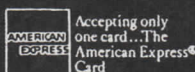


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rather simply to make change irreversible. I think he has unquestionably done that. There is no guarantee as to what we are changing into or where we are heading. We are struggling deliberately into the unknown [which is] is fraught with terror and dangerous possibility. Things could work out very well or they could work out very badly.

Isn't that what your Oldest Bolshevik in the World worries about in the play?

Yes, it is being at the crossroads. The question the Bolshevik asks at the top of the play is, without knowing where we are heading, without an intellectual model that guarantees us some sort of path, do we just sit and wait until we figure it out or do we take a deep breath and plunge in?

How does the change of political climate in America affect *Perestroika*?

Millennium was my last play of the Reagan era and *Perestroika* is the first of whatever this is. You are not as clearly in complete opposition, you put in a different energy. It is not that Clinton is great about anything, but he's not Reagan and it's not as okay to be AIDS-phobic and homophobic as it was. I am opposed to a great deal of what Clinton has done and apparently seems to be heading toward doing, but there is a difference.

What moves *Perestroika* forward, the way it moves forward, and the rate at which it moves forward is totally different from *Millennium*. It is much more contemplative and more somber, although I consider it a comedy. I think it is about resolutions and things coming to conclu-

sion that don't usually involve bloodshed.

Can the two parts stand independent of each other?

Millennium definitely does, there is no question about it at this point. It is not important that *Perestroika* does. I am not comparing it to *Faust*, obviously, but nobody ever does *Faust II* by itself, or *Peer Gynt II*

Actually, there is a certain similarity to the classical epics, isn't there? The second part's more spiritual and reflective than the first.

There is no similarity in terms of quality, but I mean everybody who writes a two-part play after Goethe will, on some level, be modeling themselves [on him]. Ibsen unquestionably did. [In *Peer Gynt*], you have this perfectly formed folk play in the first part and this gigantic sprawling, philosophical mess in the second, which is quite wonderful, but doesn't have the same sweet simplicity as the first part. The model for that obviously is *Faust*.

You end *Perestroika* on a very different note from *Millennium*.

Well, that is also the biggest risk theatrically. *Perestroika* does not end with the kind of sumptuous theatricality that the first play ends with. How could you beat an ending where an angel crashes through the ceiling? *Perestroika* ends with great quiet and hope. Prior may live for six more months, but he may not. If hope means anything at all, it has to be filtered through reality; it can't just be fantasy.

What do you feel about the way the play has been received—both as a cul-

tural and national phenomenon, and as a major gay play?

Angels has done something that I never thought a play of mine would do, it has actually had a political impact—a small one. I don't think it is something that one should ever expect, and it is not something that I want to spend the rest of my life trying to recapture. When it happens, it happens as an accident of history. Maybe *Perestroika* won't have the same thing, but I think *Millennium* opened at a crucial moment in gay and lesbian history; it got caught up in the winds of change and I am thrilled I was a part of that.

I feel very proud that *Angels* is identified as a gay play. I want it to be thought of as being part of gay culture, and I certainly want people to think of me as a gay writer. It does also seem to speak very powerfully to straight people and I want them to come and see it as well. I am very happy that the play has continued to sell very well on Broadway to audiences that are very mixed, gay and straight.

Are you working on anything new at the moment?

I have a new short play that is going into production at the Actors Theater of Louisville, that actually started with short takes (the Russian scenes) from *Perestroika*. I am working on *The Dybbuk* for Mark Lamos [Hartford Stage Company] and I have two big plays that I want to get started on, and then I have the screenplay for *Angels*.

That's going to be a Robert Altman film, isn't it?

Yes, he saw the whole thing in L.A. a couple of times and he has been to *Millennium* in New York a couple of times. His big issue at first was that he couldn't see [how to film] the angel, but now he has got it. At the party for *Short Cuts*, he described to me what he thinks the opening shots should be, and it is very exciting.

Are you concerned that the movie may be radically different from your play?

Oh, I am not concerned about that. I absolutely insisted that it happens. One of the reasons why I wanted him is that I think he is a great filmmaker. *Nashville* is clearly a major influence on *Angels in America*, at least structurally, and I knew he would be one of the few people who would take it on as a whole. I mean he never thought of reducing it to a single two-hour film, and I know it won't become a film about a heterosexual couple.

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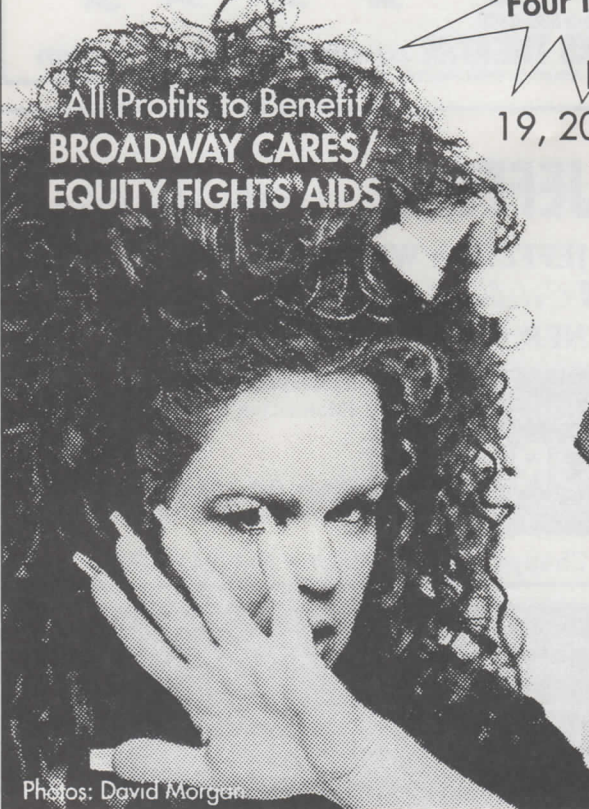
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Angels in America

Los Angeles

First workshop of *Millennium Approaches* at the Mark Taper Forum directed by Oscar Eustis—1990

San Francisco

World Premiere of *Millennium Approaches* at the Eureka Theater directed by David Esbjornson—May 1991, there were also public performances of a reading of *Perestroika*

Los Angeles

Full productions of *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* presented for the first time together at the Mark Taper Forum, directed by Oscar Eustis—November 1992

New York

Millennium Approaches—May 1993; *Perestroika* added to the repertoire—November 1993. Both productions at Walter Kerr Theater directed by George C. Wolfe

I love the idea that it is going to be a Bob Altman film based on my play. I want him to really make it his own event, and he will.

For how long has *Angels* been a part of your life?

My first conversation with Oscar Eustis, when he first asked if I would like to write a play for the Eureka Theater [San Francisco], was in 1987. I started writing on Labor Day, 1988. The play has been professionally, and even to some degree personally, the preponderant reality of my life for five-and-a-half years, and that's quite staggering.

Have you tired of *Angels* after all this time? Do you wish sometimes that it would just go away?

In the middle of the summer, I thought that I really was tired of it. I thought, who cares what Joe says to Louis anymore, I just want them to shut up and leave me alone! Then I realized I didn't want to let them go, and finishing it, in part, has been overcoming a real desire to hang on to these people. I have finally given up pretending that they are not important to me. These eight characters are, I think, basic components of who I am and the people that I love. They are my world. There may be a few other characters in me that are not in *Angels in America*, but these eight—Louis and Joe, Prior and

Angels Around the World

U.K.

Millennium Approaches—January 1992; *Perestroika*—November 1993. Both productions at the National Theater directed by Declan Donellan

Israel

Cameri Theater, Tel Aviv—March 1993

Switzerland

Theater am Neumarkt, Zurich—September 1993

Iceland

Municipal Theater, Reykjavik—October 1993

Germany

Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg—November 1993; Hessisches Staatstheater, Wiesbaden—November 1993; Theater Essen, Essen—November 1993, Niedersächsisches Staatstheater, Hannover—December 1993

Greece

Eteria Ereunas Theater, Athens—December 1993

Finland

National Theater, Helsinki—Winter 1993-94

Sweden

Municipal Theater, Stockholm—Spring/Fall 1994

Austria

Schauspielhaus, Vienna—March 1994

France

Theater de la Commune Pandora, Paris, October 1994

Denmark

Royal Theater, Copenhagen—Fall 1994

Holland

Ro-Theater, Rotterdam—Fall 1994

Hungary

Vigszinhaz Theater, Budapest—Fall 1994

Norway

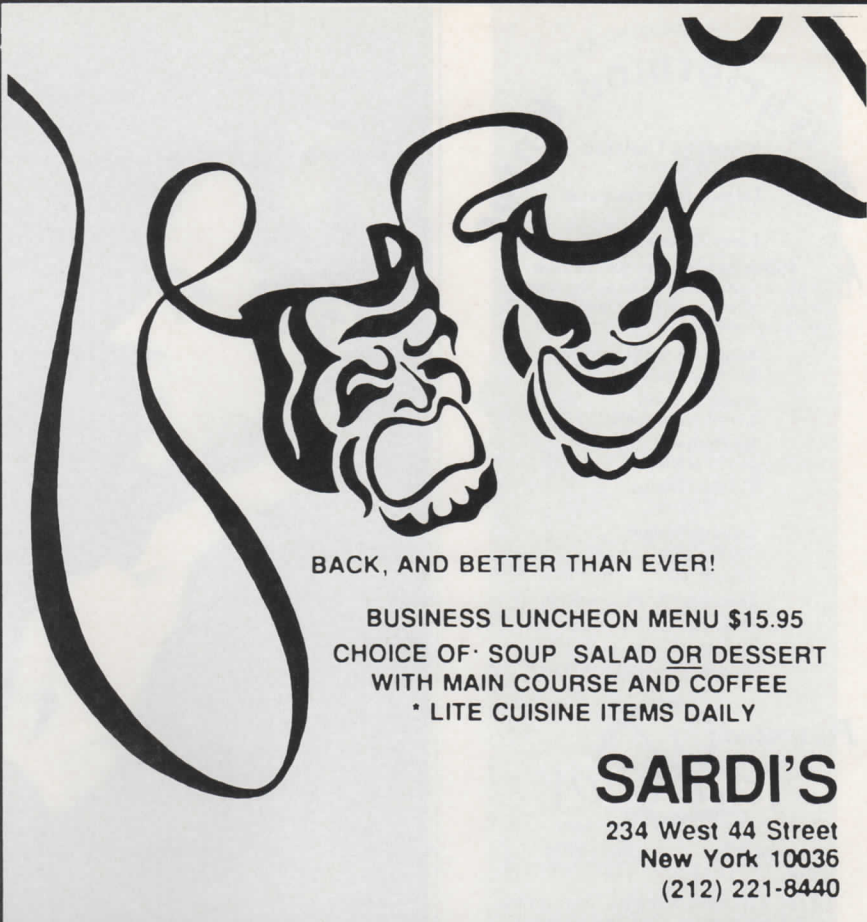
National Theater, Oslo—Fall 1994

Spain

Figaro Theater, Madrid—Fall 1994

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Belize, and Hannah and Harper—are tremendously important parts of me, even Roy. So I have decided I am actually going



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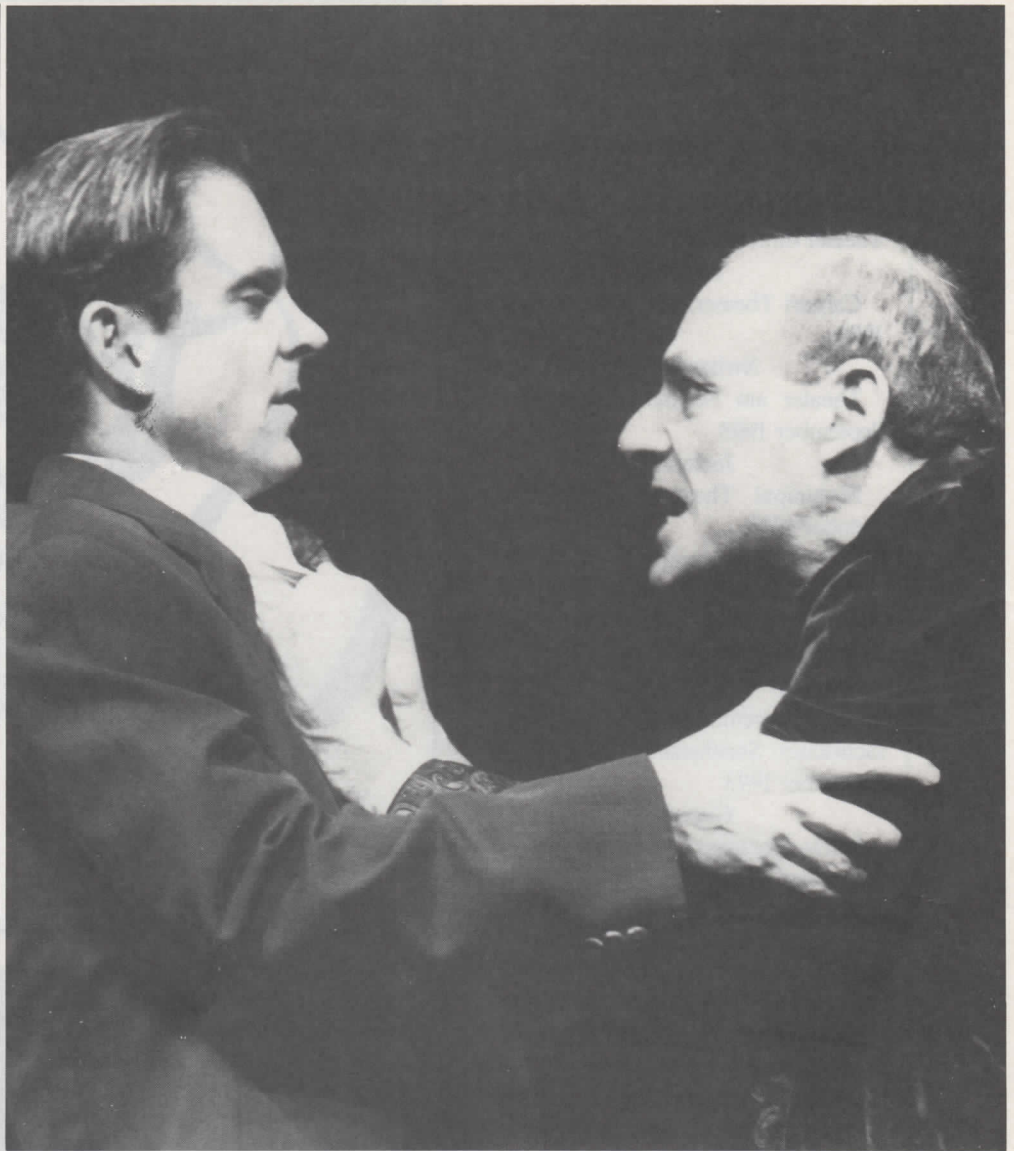
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to write a third section, but it won't be for years now and it won't be a sequel in the way that *Perestroika* is.

But it's not still going to be *Angels in America*, is it?

Well, I am going to call it *Angels in America, Part III*. I mean, it would be fun to do maybe twenty of them, to check in with these people every three or four years. I already have a plot for it, and the title is *Representative Men*, from Emerson's collection of lectures. Part of what I love in *Millennium* is that it doesn't end, and I didn't want *Perestroika* to have closure either. I wanted to keep moving forward into the future. Even after three hours and 40 minutes, people come up and say, you didn't tell us what happened to Joe in *Perestroika*. Well, I feel satisfied about where he is at the end of the play, but it's great that people are still curious. I find Hannah in her New York get-up to

be a tantalizing image in the last scene. I don't know exactly what her story is, but I would like to know more about who she could become after having lived in New York and having been friends with Prior.

So *Angels* is never really going to leave you?

Maybe not. Maybe it will become an ongoing project, permanently a part of my life. I have always been interested in the subject of this country and I have tremendously complicated and always developing feelings about my identity as a gay, Jewish American. If *Angels* is my way of thinking about that, I don't see why I should necessarily have to stop, unless I stop writing plays.

Tony Kushner's adaptation of Pierre Corneille's The Illusion opens at New York's Classic Stage Company in January 1994.

TW