

**THEATER**

The first time I crossed paths with Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning *Angels in America* was during my junior year at University of Idaho.

The campus was buzzing about an upcoming controversial play, so I went to the library and checked out a copy of the script. The second I started reading, I was drawn to it. With every page, I was forced to hold a mirror to my face. For the first time in my life, I was being held accountable for who I really was.

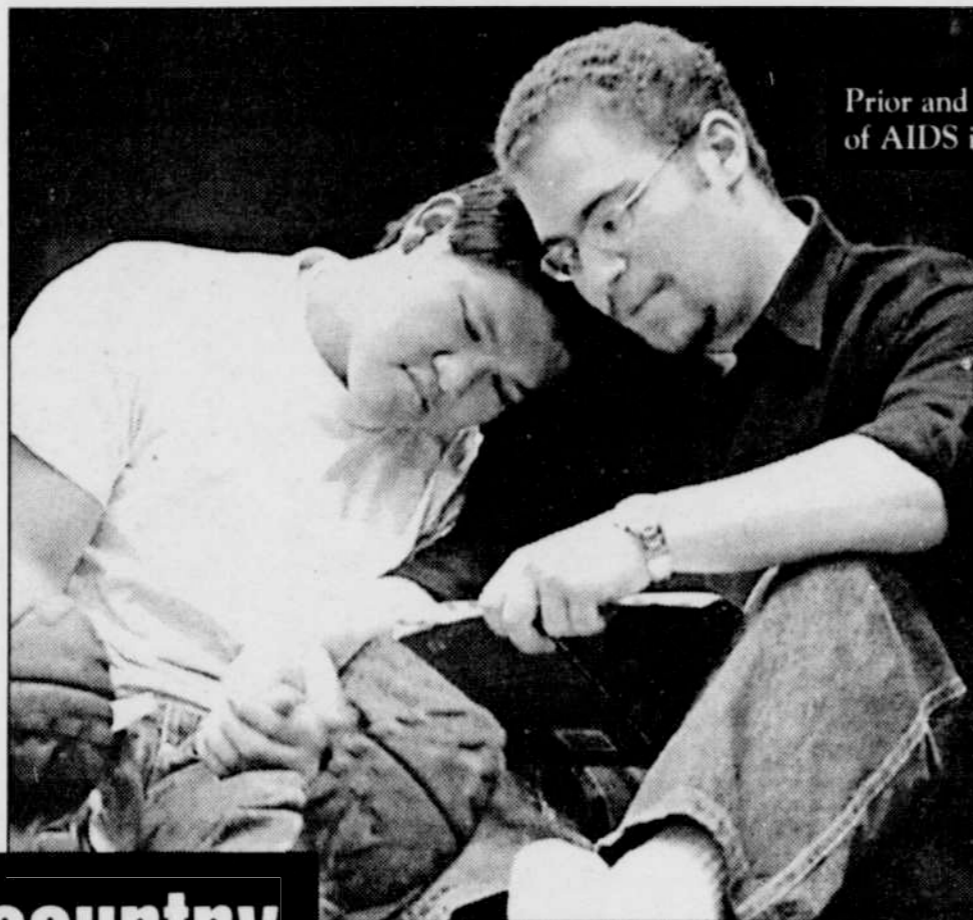
I had been living in denial, always knowing I was different but fighting the truth of why. I was brought up in a conservative military family, and being gay was simply not an option for me. Reading a piece portraying homosexuality in a frank, honest and unapologetic way affected me profoundly and began to open the door.

As an assistant stage manager, I would go to rehearsals each day and leave feeling drained, as if what I was seeing on stage was happening to me.

The character to whom I felt most connected was Joe Pitt, a young married man in the painful process of coming to terms with his sexuality. Despite all of his efforts and everything he has been conditioned to believe, he no longer can deny he is gay. His struggle was my struggle.

*Angels* is set in 1980s Reagan-era America and studies Mormonism, homosexuality, addiction and AIDS in its exploration of universal issues such as tolerance, acceptance, love, faith, loyalty and death.

Besides Joe's faltering heterosexuality, the work deals with his



Prior and Lewis journey the rocky path of AIDS in *Angels in America*

same time, sympathy for a man who has AIDS but won't even admit he's gay.

Trust me, *Angels* is as gut-wrenching and riveting as it sounds. Fortunately, Kushner offers some comic relief, specifically in the character of Belize, a former drag queen.

*Angels* is written as two separate three-hour plays, *Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Part Two: Perestroika*. This month Lewis & Clark College tackles *Part One* of the theatrical epic.

Director Stepán Simek knows he's got his work cut out for him, calling *Angels* the greatest play of the second half of the 20th century. "What it does as a piece of theater and what it says about this country is very profound," he says, noting it's about an America "deeply troubled and trying very hard to live some kind of wonderful potential but never quite managing."

Simek emphasizes Kushner's multilayered approach. "It uses the AIDS crisis and gay struggle as a symbol," he explains, to "examine the limits of tolerance. This play is about many things but primarily it is about being gay, and Kushner wants us to know that."

depressed, lonely and Valium-addicted wife, Harper. We also witness the destruction of one gay relationship because a partner is dying of AIDS and the other just can't handle it.

We see a fictionalized portrayal of real-life lawyer Roy Cohn, who is most famous for helping send Ethel and Julius Rosenberg to the electric chair. His character evokes disgust yet, at the

**A country deeply troubled**

Lewis & Clark College tackles the controversial *Angels in America*

BY MICHAEL WAYNE KECK

Lewis & Clark junior Eric Sammons agrees. The only openly gay cast member, he understands the importance of this show. "It's not something our school would normally put on, but I'm sure our campus will appreciate it and embrace it."

In an ironic twist of casting, Sammons is playing the part of Joe. "It's funny that I'm the only gay cast member but I end up playing the straight guy in the closet. Playing Joe has been like going back into the closet. It can be very intense bringing back those feelings."

He notes the work is challenging but rewarding for the other cast members as well. "All the students are very involved. This play means a lot to us."

It seems everyone touched by this play takes something different away from it. Back in college, I took with me the knowledge that I wasn't alone in my struggle. A few years later, I still carry that with me, but I also leave the performance with a newfound patience and empathy for what being gay really means.

That's what Kushner does. Without being overbearing, he challenges the audience to take a look at themselves and their own convictions. With powerful themes and strong dialogue, *Angels* manages to reach out beyond its time period and resonate with a lasting and memorable impact. **JW**

ANGELS IN AMERICA: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES plays 7:30 p.m. March 7 to 16 at Lewis & Clark College's Fir Acres Theatre. Tickets are \$3-\$8 from 503-768-7495.

MICHAEL WAYNE KECK is a Portland free-lance writer. E-mail your thoughts and reactions to *Angels in America* at michaelwaynekeck@hotmail.com.

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