THE YEAR IN performingarts-

Angels at 20

The "gay Fantasia on national themes" returns to Portland

BY RYAN J. PRADO

Twenty years ago, part one of Tony Kushner's magnum opus Angels in America: Millennium Approaches staged its world premiere in San Francisco. Few knew then that his story of eight interconnected New Yorkers, set against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis in 1985, would eventually garner multiple for his portrayal of Louis. awards-including the Pulitzer Prize for McCollum's role as Prior Drama, and Tony Award for Best Play, both in 1993—and cement itself as a seminal milestone of 20th century theater. By the time part two, Perestroika, saw its world premiere play, as Louis and Prior's in November 1992, the play had become a full-fledged cultural phenomenon.

And 20 years later, we're still dissecting the health following his disdensely personal, vulnerable tales of those eight New Yorkers, all affected by HIV/AIDS in one way or another, ravaged by the fears of facing humanity's shortcomings and fallibility, and finding the hope and love hidden within those emotions. The magic of Angels in America is in its honest portrayal of the universal themes of trust, love, passion, religion, sex, longing—and humor—while somehow managing to tran- their roles in Angels. They scend the crutch of feeling dated.

Just ask Wade McCollum, 33, and Noah Jordan, 46, both talented stage actors playing the parts of Prior Walter and Louis Ironson, closeness. respectively, for Portland Playhouse's upcom-Millennium Approaches, opening December 10, with previews December 8-9 at the World Trade Center Theater.

"It's still radical," says McCollum. "[Kushner] wrote in such a way that it absolutely articulates a very specific emotional and political situation that the country was undergoing—these trans-personal or societal themes and distilled them into people."

Very honestly I can say that."

time Angels is set, and says he remembers the across the entirety of the play. intensity of that era vividly, utilizing it as fuel

serves as the other half of one of the more heartbreaking aspects of the relationship deteriorates in tandem with Prior's covery that he has AIDS. Interestingly, McCollum and Jordan are a real-life couple, going on seven years together. The pair have appeared in productions in the past, but none as substantial as say that their perfor-

mances as an onstage couple resonate even our hearts," says Weaver. "It's not a play we can more personally given their inherent do to remember; to do it we have to put our-

"I feel like if it was another actor it would ing production of Angels in America Part 1: have to be this process of getting to know you, making sure it's okay," says McCollum of playing a relationship role. "It's advantageous that we have this uncanny trust and stability in our relationship that allows us to explore the tumult of the falling apart in a very safe way."

The heartbreak of the performance goes beyond the orbit of Prior and Louis, though. Director and Portland Playhouse artistic diissues. The genius of it is he took these grand rector Brian Weaver admits he's never actually deciphering, deconstructing and ultimately ac- the group's executive director; and Nikki, 28, seen a production of Angels, but has read the cepting the vulnerability of Kushner's writing. Brian's wife, the education director and acting "Times have changed, and thank God," play multiple times. Weaver says he's taking says Jordan. "AIDS is now a 'manageable ill- an active role in making sure that the producness.' But [Angels] doesn't feel dated to me. tion remains an intense, present story, rather than a retrospective. To him, that means em-Jordan lived in New York City during the bracing the heartbreak of all the characters

It breaks my heart, working on it. My hope is space in 2008. Despite the exterior of the that we'll be able to take the intensity we're building managing to hold its stoic, overfinding in rehearsals and translate that into the grown stature, its interior boasts a living envishow with the audience. I think for that to happen, the audience has to want that, too."

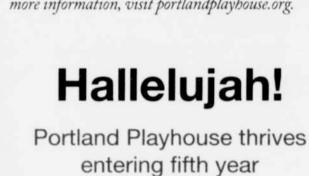
mains a powerful part of the experience of the unrolling a wrinkly script. Welcome to Portplay. McCollum hopes that symbiosis will draw land Playhouse. audiences who aren't there simply to be entertained, but to become engaged in the work of an, 36, acts as artistic director; Michael, 33, is

confronted with something different at the ences in years. same time, rather than a fascist approach where

body knows this is the sad part.

"I'm excited to see this play and their audience, and hopefully a bunch of new audience members to Portland Playhouse's community to experience this piece of art."

Angels in America Part 1: Millennium Ap-PROACHES previews Dec. 8-9 at the World Trade Center Theater (121 SW Salmon St.). Opening night is December 10; evening shows are 7:30 p.m., Sunday matinees are at 2 p.m. The play runs through December 31. Tickets are \$15-\$32, a portion of which goes to benefit Our House of Portland. For more information, visit portlandplayhouse.org.



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The old Mt. Sinai Church in Northeast Portland—some 105 years old—had sat idle before Brian, Nikki and Michael Weaver realselves in the middle of the tragedy and feel it. ized their vision of a neighborhood theater ronment of creativity: actors running lines where pews once stood; tape marking off set The give-and-take with the audience re- design placement; a busy director rolling and

The theater company is a family affair. Bri-"That is such an extraordinary feat of crafts- apprentice director. The collaborative working manship on [Kushner's] part," explains McCo- arrangement has worked well for the Weavllum, "allowing the drama to unfold in such a ers, and has helped them produce some of the way that everybody in the audience is being most exciting new Portland theater experi-

Brian and Michael, Virginia natives, had "I don't think we can do it without breaking everybody knows this is the funny part, every- dreamed of a theater all their own for years



