

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 awards—including the Pulitzer Prize for 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 in November 1992, the play had become a full-fledged cultural phenomenon.

And 20 years later, we're still dissecting the densely 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 transcend 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, respectively, for Portland Playhouse's upcoming production of *Angels in America Part 1: 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 issues. The genius of it is he took these grand themes and distilled them into people."

"Times have changed, and thank God," says Jordan. "AIDS is now a 'manageable illness.' But [*Angels*] doesn't feel dated to me. Very honestly I can say that."

Jordan lived in New York City during the time *Angels* is set, and says he remembers the intensity of that era vividly, utilizing it as fuel

for his portrayal of Louis. McCollum's role as Prior serves as the other half of one of the more heart-breaking aspects of the play, as Louis and Prior's relationship deteriorates in tandem with Prior's health following his discovery 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 their roles in *Angels*. They say that their performances as an onstage couple resonate even more personally given their inherent closeness.

"I feel like if it was another actor it would 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 director Brian Weaver admits he's never actually seen a production of *Angels*, but has read the play multiple times. Weaver says he's taking an active role in making sure that the production remains an intense, present story, rather than a retrospective. To him, that means embracing the heartbreak of all the characters across the entirety of the play.

"I don't think we can do it without breaking

our hearts," says Weaver. "It's not a play we can do to remember; to do it we have to put ourselves in the middle of the tragedy and feel it. It breaks my heart, working on it. My hope is that we'll be able to take the intensity we're finding in rehearsals and translate that into the show with the audience. I think for that to happen, the audience has to want that, too."

The give-and-take with the audience remains a powerful part of the experience of the play. McCollum hopes that symbiosis will draw audiences who aren't there simply to be entertained, but to become engaged in the work of deciphering, deconstructing and ultimately accepting the vulnerability of Kushner's writing.

"That is such an extraordinary feat of craftsmanship on [Kushner's] part," explains McCollum, "allowing the drama to unfold in such a way that everybody in the audience is being confronted with something different at the same time, rather than a fascist approach where everybody knows this is the funny part, every-

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 APPROACHES 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.



Hallelujah!

Portland Playhouse thrives entering fifth year

BY RYAN J. PRADO

The old Mt. Sinai Church in Northeast Portland—some 105 years old—had sat idle before Brian, Nikki and Michael Weaver realized their vision of a neighborhood theater space in 2008. Despite the exterior of the building managing to hold its stoic, overgrown stature, its interior boasts a living environment of creativity: actors running lines where pews once stood; tape marking off set design placement; a busy director rolling and unrolling a wrinkly script. Welcome to Portland Playhouse.

The theater company is a family affair. Brian, 36, acts as artistic director; Michael, 33, is the group's executive director; and Nikki, 28, Brian's wife, the education director and acting apprentice director. The collaborative working arrangement has worked well for the Weavers, and has helped them produce some of the most exciting new Portland theater experiences in years.

Brian and Michael, Virginia natives, had dreamed of a theater all their own for years

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