



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 04, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: WRESTLING WITH "ANGELS IN AMERICA"

ANGELS IN AMERICA ** 1/2 out of ****

NEIL SIMON THEATRE

Is *Angels In America* a great play? The question is almost absurd. It's clearly a landmark work of theater. It's unquestionably a *good* play. If you traveled back in time and asked me the same question when I exited the theater after seeing Part 1 on Broadway in 1993 I would have laughed: the entire production and certainly the exhilaration of Part 1 remains one of the most thrilling nights of theater in my life. No one questioned the play's greatness; that wasn't allowed. I just knew that decades from now, this show would be revived and performed again and again. Indeed, here we are on Broadway 25 years later. I've no doubt it will be back in 2043.

And yet, after two problematic revivals (the fine Signature revival Off Broadway and this more problem-plagued revival on Broadway), I am starting to wonder. It's a pity I didn't get to see the Ivo Van Hove production at BAM. But I'm left with what I have seen and I'm worrying over whether a play that looms so large in my imagination has stood the test of time. Maybe it's a simple case of nothing being able to match my memory.

If you saw Marlon Brando directed by Elia Kazan in the Broadway debut of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, could any subsequent production do anything but pale in comparison? The impact of *Angels In America* in that brilliant original version helmed by George C. Wolfe and let by a peerless cast ranks right up there. (And dear god, was that stage teeming with characters really performed by just eight people?)

On the other hand, a great play should reveal new facets, new depths with a good revival. Every time I see an August Wilson play, I become ever more convinced of his towering achievement. The same has not happened with *Angels in America*.



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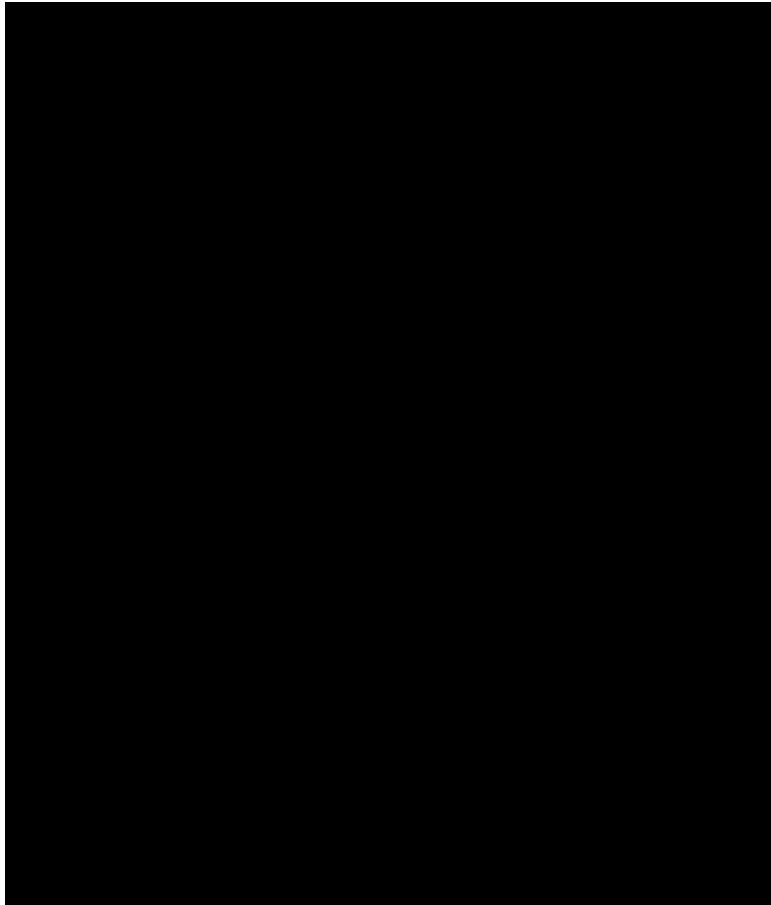
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For the moment, I'm going to blame the productions, not the play. The big sweeping moments -- the undeniable ambition and desire of playwright Tony Kushner to sweep up history and communism and religion and family and sexuality and the plague of AIDS and decades of American history and so much more in his all-encompassing work -- feels less crucial now. Not dated, just not as involving. Today, it's the human moments and not the spectacle, the sympathy and not the didactic speeches that touch me. "It's not you, it's me," I want to say, though usually when we say this we're being polite and it's really you.



Ok, enough with the nonsense, the dithering. Here is the good news. The theater is packed, the audience is notably young for Broadway and a punch line about President Reagan doesn't just get laughs, it gets applause. Simply seeing *Angels In America* in that atmosphere is fun - if you've never seen it before, by all means do what you can to see this before it's gone. Certainly my strong reservations about this particular production and more modest concerns about the play in general are by far the minority (if not a minority of one).

Denise Gough has improved since London (maybe after nailing down her American accent enough to focus on her performance?), James McArdle takes the undeniably tricky role of Louis Ironson (the man who abandons his lover when AIDS rears its ugly head) and pulls it off, Lee Pace is an appealing addition as a closeted Mormon disciple of

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- ▶ [February](#) (1)

- ▶ [2017](#) (6)
- ▶ [2016](#) (2)
- ▶ [2015](#) (14)
- ▶ [2014](#) (2)
- ▶ [2013](#) (5)
- ▶ [2012](#) (18)
- ▶ [2011](#) (15)
- ▶ [2010](#) (10)
- ▶ [2009](#) (43)
- ▶ [2008](#) (86)
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- ▶ [2006](#) (2412)
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Roy Cohn, Susan Brown is a little soft as Hannah Pitt but redeems herself as Ethel Rosenberg and Nathan Stewart-Jarrett finds a subtler angle on the nurse Belize. I don't think anyone will ever pull off the odd mannered speech of the Angels ("I...I...I...I...I really don't") but Amanda Lawrence creates a distinctive spin on the part. The other Nathan -- Nathan Lane -- I assumed would be chewing up the scenery a la Ron Leibman. But he's too good an actor for that: Lane finds a quieter, more human Roy Cohn, still funny and still ferocious but less of a broad brush-stroke villain. It's terrific work (of course) and you should see this *Angels In America* for Nathan Lane's performance alone, but that's true of Nathan Lane in almost anything ever.

Here is the bad news: Andrew Garfield as Prior Walter. He's a very good actor I've admired on stage and screen. Here Garfield makes a conscious choice about how to play the central role of the piece and for me it just doesn't work. I adamantly do not believe only gay actors should play gay roles, but I can't think of a better way to describe what he's doing than to say Garfield is playing gay while Stephen Spinella in the original production simply was gay. Oh he wasn't playing himself or just being gay. Spinella was playing a specific character and that character both toyed with and subverted and celebrated gay stereotypes in a high-wire act that took your breath away.

Garfield lacks nuance and melody by starting each scene emotionally at 11 and then turning it up higher. He's made a bold choice and sticks grimly to it throughout the night; it's just the wrong choice. I'd say much the same about numerous other passages in a show directed by Marianne Elliott. Some of the fights between Joe and Harper Pitt or Joe and Louis or Harper and Joe's mother and most anything with Prior Walter -- it plays at one pitch and one pitch alone and it's a very high pitch. Rarely have I wanted to give notes to so many actors to modulate, to find some quiet place and build a scene rather than begin at the peak. Only Nathan Lane in a role that was famously broad and big and huuuuge from start to finish crafts his scenes with care so they can actually go somewhere.

Other more fundamental problems exist. The scenic design by Ian MacNeil -- especially in Part 1 -- is simply disastrous. Three different revolving sets appear on stage in a row, vaguely indicating settings like hospital room or office or home. The problem is that they are ugly, utilitarian and hard to tell apart. When one set revolves to indicate we are now outside that setting, you can barely tell the difference. They dominate the entire first half until with a flourish we get a hint of more elaborate sets to come in part two. Those are more open, more theatrical (a hospital room might include a bed and some neon lights to indicate the walls surrounding it) but they're unprepossessing on their own. The contrast between part one and two offers no particular reward visually. The sense of the stage opening up is modest and amounts to very little when all is said and done. And the music by Adrian Sutton is so jarring, so intrusive and grandly self-important that it feels like a joke. After hearing it for two nights I am astonished

they didn't just remove it entirely. (Sutton has done excellent work on *War Horse* and *The Curious Incident...* and other shows. I can only assume he was giving Elliott precisely what she wanted.)

The Angel is augmented with puppeteers for her movement and wings -- I do love puppetry so while this gambit isn't a problem as such, I wish I liked it more. More positively, the Angel Shadows are the cast members clad in a mottled sort of costume who serve as puppeteers and move pieces of the set on and off the stage. They scuttle on and slither off in a creepy sort of way that adds an unsettling undercurrent to Part Two that at least adds interest where so little else of Elliott's choices do.

And yet...and yet. Every time I wanted to dismiss some aspect of the play or its structure or the themes it ambitiously tackled, damned if I wasn't drawn in again by a scene, a character, a splash of bitter humor. I sat there for eight hours and was never bored for a second. I was provoked or angered or moved or pricked or ready to argue, but I was never bored. That alone speaks to the achievement of Kushner.

Even after seeing it three times and reading the text, I can be surprised by what's in it. The show has an admirable empathy for all its characters -- including the electric scene in which Roy Cohn dies and others recite the Kaddish while stealing his bootleg supply of AZT. And yet, I'd forgotten that every character is accounted for and embraced by the end in one way or another...except the poor conflicted, once closeted Joe Pitt. Was there no room for him to find peace or at least be blessed in his confused journey towards self-discovery or self-destruction?

So I want to wrestle with *Angels*, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel. I want to argue and talk back and applaud and kvetch. And just when I think I've got the angel pinned down (ok, maybe this play isn't dated so much as "of its time") then it slips out of my grasp and surprises me again. Jacob had only one night while I needed two, but even that doesn't seem enough for a work that still confounds and challenges me. When 2043 rolls around, I'll be ready for a rematch.

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