

## A response to the AIDS epidemic in *Angels in America* and *Rent*

By Nicole Motahari

Disease and literature have long worked hand in hand. In the Victorian Era, there was consumption, tuberculosis as we now know it. Authors would kill their characters off with this beautiful disease, leaving them to waste away tragically (Foster). With penicillin and modern medicine, cancer became the new consumption- a method of execution that was both literal and metaphorical. However, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new disease arose, one that slowly rose to create a hysteria in the general public of America that had not been seen since the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic (Fee and Fox). Eventually, the world of popular culture sensed a new way to delve into the concept of societal perspectives on the connection between illness and morality in what we now call the AIDS virus.

Popular culture often acts as a mirror, reflecting cultural beliefs and stigmas. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Chris Columbus's *Rent* were both created for the stage, and eventually made their way to the screen. These respective works mirror society at the beginning, and at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Kushner's Roy Cohn's firm monologue to his doctor portrays the absolute denial society had about the true logistics of the disease, while Prior's comparatively quiet suffering holds religious associations. Whether Prior's religious visions are reality, or delusional is a matter left unanswered, but the fact that they occur at all in the literature is in itself an association that elevates the character and the disease to martyrdom.

In *Rent*, the world is slightly more forgiving. Perhaps the widespread acceptance in the musical is due to community ties, or simply due to the medicinal advances such as AZT that by that time were more available to the general public. Furthermore, AIDS victims in fact are not

confined to merely homosexual men, but characters such as Roger and Mimi, who contracted AIDS through shared needles are also portrayed. *Rent* holds its fair share of religious symbolism as well, from the character of Angel, who appears like a savior on Christmas day, to Mimi's resurrection, calling to mind the proverbial Lazarus who suffered from leprosy and yet rose to the bosom of Abraham when he died.

To gain a proper understanding of the biological circumstances in the two works, one needs to create a timeline of the epidemic spanning from the beginning of the disease through 1985, when *Angels in America* takes place and into the early 1990's where we leave off at the end of *Rent*. 1981 was the start of the AIDS crisis in America when five young homosexual men from Los Angeles were diagnosed with *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP). Around the same time, there were rising reports of a group of men among California and New York who were diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, called Kaposi's sarcoma (AVERT).

In December of that year, the first documented cases of PCP in people who used intravenous drugs were reported. At the end of the year, there were 270 reported cases of immune deficiency in gay men, and 121 deaths. In 1982, due to a group of cases in Californian homosexual men, the syndrome was thought to be sexual, and was labeled GRID- gay-related immune deficiency. Later that year, the disease was found in hemophiliacs, a fact that Roy Cohn mocks when diagnosed. The syndrome was also found in Haitians, misleading people into believing the disease originated from that region.

According to Dr. Richard Dix, Dr. Georgia State University Infectious disease professor and leading researcher in the field of Sexually Transmitted infections:

“In the case of the men in San Francisco, not knowing what caused the syndrome led to concern in the professional community, and that spilled over into other people. To the media, it looked like a death sentence. AIDS sent imaginations running, leaving society with the same kind of discriminative behavior that people of the Jewish faith experienced around the Holocaust. The sheer panic and hysteria left people ready to point fingers, some even going as far to take it to a religious level, saying that this was a Biblical disease of sorts, calling it God’s punishment for the actions of gay men and drug addicts” (Dix).

That September, the CDC dubbed the condition as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), describing it as a disease that occurred “in a person with no known cause for diminished resistance to that disease.”

In 1983, it was discovered that female partners of males who had AIDS could contract the disease, meaning that it could be contracted via heterosexual intercourse. By September 1983, the CDC had discovered most routes of transmission, and had eliminated the possibility of AIDS being spread via food, water, air or casual contact. In November, they met for the first time to discuss the AIDS situation- by the end of 1983, the number of cases had risen to 3,064, with 1,292 deaths.

1984 led to the creation of blood testing for the screening of the virus and the focus of the CDC was raising awareness of transmission via needles. San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York all ordered the closing of private sex clubs and bathhouses.

In 1985, Ryan White, a teenager who contracted AIDS through contaminated products used to treat his hemophilia, was banned from school. In October of that year, Rock Hudson died

of AIDS, shaking the social stigmas the syndrome had associated with it. By the end of 1985, every region in the world had reported at least a single case of AIDS.

March of 1987 brought groundbreaking changes, in that the first antiretroviral drug, zidovudine (AZT) was approved by the FDA. The following years proceeded in a state of tenuous balance, until 1990, when the United States created the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities, including those living with HIV and AIDS. Dix says “With the development of anti-virus inhibitors, AIDS shifted slowly from being a death sentence to no different than Hepatitis B”. To finish off the timeline for purposes of the essay, 1991 brought a great deal of attention to AIDS and those living with it. The Red Ribbon project was created to raise awareness and sympathy for those living with HIV. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, basketball player Magic Johnson announced to the public that he had HIV and retired from the NBL, choosing to educate young people about the virus instead of continuing basketball. A few weeks later, Freddie Mercury, a lead singer of the rock band Queen announced his AIDS diagnosis and died the day after. Both *Angels in America* and *Rent* were written close on the heels of these events, with *Angels in America* debuting in 1993, and *Rent* which was written around 1992, premiering in 1996. Both of these works were written during a period of time when the stigma of AIDS was still strong.

*Angels in America* takes place in Ronald Reagan’s America. Set in October of 1985, the first thing Kushner does it to open with a funeral, contradicting the circle that typically flows from life to death. He reverses the order for Prior in his play, beginning with the single event that inspires fear and dread in every living soul. Kushner associates death with the past, both burdens that are inevitable, but must be born. The past is just as part of who someone is, as their death- a sentiment echoed in *Rent*. The very first song sung in *Rent*, *Seasons of Love*, asks “How do you

measure the life of a woman or a man? In truths that he learned, or in times that he cried? In bridges he burned, or the way that he died?”. The song alludes to the truths that AIDS victims learned, based on those who abandoned them because of their diagnosis. This also ties into the idea of bridges burned, for those who lost the love of their family, friends and everyone they care for. AIDS changes the way others perceive them, labeling patients by the way that they died. Whatever they had done, any accomplishments made in their life were all forgotten because of the label thrust upon them.

A primary character who plays a vital role in Kushner’s depiction of AIDS is Roy Cohn, New York lawyer and “unofficial power broker” (*Millennium Approaches* 3). The first image presented of him is in his office, barking out orders on the phone, placating and yelling at various powerful community figures (Judge Hollins and Mrs. Hollins) (*Millennium Approaches* 12). This scene provides a glimpse into the Janus-like nature of the character, as Roy assures Mrs. Soffer that he had “business” in Haiti, a fact that foreshadows Roy’s future condition, since Haiti was one of the first nations to have reported cases of AIDS. While Roy insists on his heterosexuality, something about his protégé, a young Mormon named Joe Pitt appeals to him. The relationship between these two men who so thoroughly deny their homosexuality is meant to be that of a father and son, and in the text it remains so. However, Al Pacino’s portrayal of Roy is slightly more salacious for lack of a better term, constantly touching Joe and rubbing his back in a rather sensual manner.

None of Kushner’s characters is perfect. Each has a unique flaw. Harper, Joe Pitt’s Valium-addicted, hallucinating wife is perhaps saner than many of the other characters in the play. Even in her hallucinations, her intuition remains intact. While speaking of the new millennium, she tells “Mr. Lies” that “Maybe Joe loves me and I’m only crazy thinking

otherwise, or maybe it's not, maybe it's worse than I know, maybe... I want to know, maybe I don't," (*Millennium Approaches* 18). When Joe comes home, they have a 'buddy kiss', supposedly because of Harper's anxiety, but it appears that the quick peck is for Joe's comfort more so than Harper's.

The scene cuts to Prior and Louis, leaving the funeral, with Louis apologizing for not introducing Prior as his boyfriend, claiming "I always get so closety at these family things" (*Millennium Approaches* 20), before Prior sits him down and shows him the Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion that has developed- the first symptom of AIDS. The text has Louis hurriedly making an excuse that "It's just a burst blood vessel" (*Millennium Approaches* 21), but Ben Shenkmen's portrayal of Louis in the miniseries has Louis recoiling in horror for a brief second when he first sees the lesion, before making the excuse. This simple action speaks a million words. This was a time when AIDS had no known cure, when it was, in all cases, a death sentence. Prior keeps telling Louis to let go of his arm, but the words run deeper than that, as Louis keeps repeating himself, saying "No" over and over again (*Millennium Approaches* 21-22).

The words Harper speaks in the next scene seem to reflect the general mindset of the American public during this time period: "Pretend-happy. That's better than nothing" (*Millennium Approaches* 26). Later in the scene, Joe speaks a line that is a strong parallel for the LGBTQ community, saying "America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred place among the nations. People aren't ashamed of it like they used to be" (*Millennium Approaches* 26). Joe Pitt himself is gay, and he simply cannot face it until Part 2 of the play- *Perestroika*. The American public kept the same idea of "pretend-happy" in their minds, and did everything they could to keep AIDS out of sight and out of mind. Part of the panic over the disease was the association with homosexuality, which brought about an inference that the illness was in ways, a

punishment. In his interview, Dix recalls an occasion when he was attending a party at a friend's house. "The moment I mentioned that I had been working with AIDS patients, they asked me to leave" he told me in an interview.

Scene six is a crucial scene in portraying exactly how taboo homosexuality was. Joe walks in on Louis crying in the bathroom, and after Joe comforts Louis, the two get into a discussion about politics, underlined with a snarky sense of flirtation, saying:

Louis Ironson: Well, oh boy. A gay Republican.

Joe Pitt: Excuse me?

Louis Ironson: Nothing.

Joe Pitt: Oh, I'm not... no, forget it.

Louis Ironson: Not... Republican? Not Republican?

Joe Pitt: What?

Louis Ironson: What.

Joe Pitt: Not gay. I'm not gay.

Louis Ironson: Oh. Sorry. It's just that sometimes you can tell by the way a person sounds. I mean, you sound...

Joe Pitt: No, I don't. Like what?

Louis Ironson: Like a Republican.

Joe Pitt: Do I sound like a...?

Louis Ironson: What? Like a Republican? Or do I?

Joe Pitt: Do you what?

Louis Ironson: Sound like a...

Joe Pitt: Yeah. Like a... I'm confused.

Louis Ironson: Yes. My name is Louis but all my friends call me Louise. I work in word processing. Thanks for the toilet paper.

[Joe goes to speak, but Louis quickly plants a kiss on his cheek before exiting, leaving Joe slightly shocked] (*Millenium Approaches* 30).

Furthermore, when they first meet, Louis places himself at the bottom of the totem pole, calling himself “word processor, lowest of the low”. It could be a possibility, especially in a Republican dominated environment, such as the courts, that Louis’s low status correlates with his sexuality. After all, a word processor is akin to a secretary in many ways, a position that has traditionally been associated with women. However, beyond the first correction Joe makes, claiming he’s not homosexual, the rest of the discourse completely avoids using the word “gay”.

However, the top of the cake as far as homophobia lies with Roy Cohn. When diagnosed with AIDS, his doctor, Henry, hesitates to break it to him, but Roy generalizes anyways, offhandedly saying “it afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts”, with Henry stating that “Hemophiliacs are also at risk”. Roy pushes him by saying “Roy Marcus Cohn you are a... WITH an H Henry and it isn’t “Hemophiliac”. Roy goes on to explain exactly why he refuses to believe he’s a homosexual:

Roy Cohn: AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who a person sleeps with, but they don't tell you that.

Henry: No?

Roy Cohn: No. Like all labels they tell you one thing, and one thing only: Where does an individual so identified fit into the food chain, the pecking order? Not ideology or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will come to the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, a homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men, but really this is wrong. A homosexual is somebody who, in 15 years of trying cannot get a pissant anti-discrimination bill through the city council. A homosexual is somebody who knows nobody and who nobody knows. Who has zero clout. Does this sound like me Henry?”

In the end, Roy settles for self-diagnosing himself with liver cancer. That’s how terrible a stigma being homosexual or having AIDS was (NPR). Homosexuals were people with no power, no voice, no say. They were a community muffled and shackled at the time.



The dream scene in *Angels in America* that takes place during part one between Harper and Prior blurs the line between fantasy and reality, instead focusing on the “threshold of revelations” (*Millennium Approaches* 33). Both Harper and Prior are sick, Harper emotionally, Prior physically- as Harper says “I can’t expect someone who’s really sick to entertain me” (*Millennium Approaches* 33). When Prior asks how she knew, again she references the “Threshold of revelations” (*Millennium Approaches* 33). When it becomes Prior’s turn to tell Harper something she didn’t know, his revelation is that “Your husband’s a homo”, confirming a fact that she had been trying to avoid (*Millennium Approaches* 33). The very last revelation Harper leaves Prior with is that “Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part, completely free of disease”, referring to Prior’s soul, going against the idea that AIDS was a moral disease. Especially coming from a Mormon, it hearkens to a higher level of spirituality.

AIDS is not beautified in *Angels in America*. As Prior says, “We who are about to die, thank you”, to which Louis’s immediate response is, “You’re not about to die”. AIDS ripped apart relationships, as it did between Louis and Prior. As Prior told Louis “two new lesions, my leg hurts. There’s protein in my urine, but who knows what the fuck that portends. Anyway it shouldn’t be there, the protein. My butt is chapped from diarrhea and yesterday I shat blood” (*Millennium Approaches* 39) Louis immediately starts to panic at the laundry list of medical issues, asking “Would you hate me if I walked out on this?” (*Millennium Approaches* 39). Obviously, one would expect relationships to be difficult if a partner gets sick, but AIDS is divisive to the point of breaking relationships apart, a theme which *Rent* touches on as well. As Prior tells Louis, “theoretically [you can love someone and fail them], but not you, specifically you, I think you’re excluded from that general category” (*Millennium Approaches* 78).

Joe Pitt's painful relationship with his mother gives credit to the point. At 4 in the morning, drunk, he calls his mother to confess, saying "Mom. Momma. I'm a homosexual, Momma". To which his mother replies, "You're being ridiculous... (suddenly getting angry) Drinking is a sin! A sin! I raised you better than that". Of course, the film makes it quite obvious that the sin to which she's referring to metaphorically is the supposed sin of homosexuality. On the subject of spirituality, *Angels in America* pulls in many blatant spiritual references, but it also utilizes the references metaphorically. Belize acts as a sort of guardian angel for Prior, paralleling the character of Angel in *Rent*. Prior is often referred to as "Prophet. Seer. Revelator" in reference to the supposedly physical presence of an angel arriving, but it can mean so much more. Prior can 'see' things that others can't, though it's a matter of the soul. Prior can see into Harper's life and he calls it the "threshold of revelations" (*Millennium Approaches* 33). Both he and Harper have hallucinations in the text, but it seems more so because they are intuitive, rather than because they are crazy, unlike Roy Cohn who claims not to have anything wrong with him. Roy sees hallucinations as well, but his hallucinations are a ghost from the past, a guilty one, coming back to haunt him. Prior's hallucinations bring supposed joy and spirituality, Harper's hallucinations bring comfort, but Roy's hallucinations bring the filth that coats his soul from the past back into the present.

The ideas of filth and sin also haunt Joe as he takes a step over the threshold of his sexuality, following Louis from work to the park. When Joe places his hand on Louis's cheek, he says "I'm going to hell for this" (*Millennium Approaches* 116), explaining that "I don't deserve to be loved", to which Louis says: "See, we already have a lot in common" (*Millennium Approaches* 117). While Louis's guilt derives from his love for Prior, Joe's guilt is sourced by his strong Mormon upbringing, which carries over into *Perestroika*, Part 2 of *Angels in America*,

when he goes back to Louis's apartment, the hesitation follows, until they come through to pure sensual sensation.

On a parallel plane, Prior finally has an orgasm, climaxing when he sees or dreams of the angel. Once again, Kushner plays with the strict boundaries between spirituality and sexuality that society has defined. This concept is also brought into play when Joe's discussing his sexuality with Harper, as he explained that the first time he felt attracted to a man was when looking at the book of Bible studies and he saw a picture of Jacob wrestling with an angel. He explained "the angel is...a beautiful man with golden hair, and wings of course. I still dream about it. Many nights" (*Millenium Approaches* 49). Joe's spirituality inspired both sexual emotions and residual guilt, a concept that is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Roy Cohn's medical struggle is one that he is quickly losing. While Prior is in and out of the hospital, Roy Cohn is hospitalized already, under the care of Belize. At this point, azidothymidine, or AZT was still not a widespread treatment, and was in its earlier stages of human trials. Upon his hospitalization, Belize advises Roy to avoid the possibility of placebos, and to use what power he has left to acquire the true medication. In the 80's, the double blind testing meant that there was no guarantee of actually being dosed with AZT. Of course, Roy Cohn being Roy Cohn, and still under the pretense of having liver cancer, called Martin and tells him "I want my own private stash, Martin. Of this serious Honest-Abe medicine. That I control here in the room with me" (31 *Perestroika*). Belize is in awe when he sees it, saying "there are maybe thirty people in the whole country who are getting this drug...there are a hundred thousand who need it. Look at you. The dragon atop the golden horde" (*Perestroika* 60). Roy is blatantly unrepentant about the matter, though afterwards, he talks to his hallucination, talking about how "The worst thing in America, Ethel is you are booted out of the parade. Americans

have no use for the sick” (*Perestroika* 60). This reflects the conditions at the time. If you became terminally sick, you were done for. People abandoned you, and you had no power, no supporters, you just faded into the shadows of apologies and condolences.

When Louis attempts to confess about Joe to Prior, Prior’s response responds: “There are thousands of gay men in New York City with AIDS and nearly every one of them is being taken care of by a friend or by a lover...everyone except me” (*Perestroika* 88). This speaks volumes as to how AIDS was divisive not only in the straight community, but in the gay community as well. Louis’s rant to Belize speaks as to the feelings of so many watching their friends suffer: “This is a new era, you know, things are uglier, scarier, I mean, the rest of us should just surrender, just surrender, just give the fuck up, I mean... *Oh god. I am so fucking wet and miserable*” (*Perestroika* 95). Even Prior’s nurse (whose character is always played by the same actress who portrays the Angel from Prior’s hallucinations), has become exasperated with his lack of care for himself. The two people who stick by Prior through it all are Belize and Hannah Pitt. Hannah is, as Prior puts it “This is my ex-lover’s lover’s Mormon mother” (*Perestroika* 102). However, her belief in Prior’s visions is what helps get him through the hardest times of his AIDS, to which she refers to as “a cancer” (*Perestroika* 105), not only in the literal sense, as far as the Kaposi’s sarcoma, but as far as the way his beliefs have been eating away at his faith in both life and love.

With the illness comes deprivation of not only faith, but status. When Roy Cohn was dying, the lawyers found the strength in his weakness to disbar him. Roy lost his physical power, and in that, he lost his metaphorical power, the fear he held over the other lawyers. When they realized he was on AZT and had AIDS, not liver cancer, Roy became a point of ridicule amongst his former coworkers, who said “Finally. I’ve hated that little faggot for thirty-six years” (*Perestroika* 113), renewing the idea of AIDS as punishment or justice. Prior also struggles with

power in the text, but more so power of his own future, over his life, than power over other people. Perhaps his dreams of being “Prophet and seer” are only a manifestation of what he wants for himself- the ability to see into his own future, to prophesize his own life, rather than death. Even in death, there are some higher powers and rituals that remain. Love and forgiveness still remain. Even life triumphs over death. After Roy Cohn’s death, when Belize and Louis are stealing AZT from a dead Roy to give to Prior, Belize tells Louis, “I needed a Jew. You were the first one to come to mind. We’re going to thank him. For the pills,” and then instructs Louis to say the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead. When Louis protests the idea of praying for someone as terrible as Roy Cohn, Belize replies, “So maybe... A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at last.” While Louis doesn’t know all the words to the Kaddish, Ethel Rosenberg, the hallucination or ghost of the woman whose death Roy caused does know the Kaddish. Despite her earlier saying that “I came to forgive, but all I can do is take pleasure in your misery” (*Perestroika* 114), she seems to have taken heart from Belize’s speech, and recites the Kaddish, giving forgiveness and peace at last.

However, for all forgiveness, there are some things that AIDS has broken apart completely. When Louis returns to Prior, Louis thinks that Prior will take him back, but Prior’s response is: “I love you Louis... I really do. But you can’t come back. Not ever. I’m sorry. But you can’t” (*Perestroika* 143). Just as Louis can’t come back, neither can Joe. Harper leaves him, finally, and as she leaves on the airplane, she says “Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there’s a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead” (*Perestroika* 144).

Just as the character's perspectives on homosexuality in *Angels in America*, there is a perestroika of kinds both internally in the play as well as the audience's perspectives in regards to the play over time. The term Perestroika, used to subtitle the second part of the play, was originally a Russian term used in the mid 1980s to describe specific economic reforms introduced by Gorbachev. However, the literal definition of perestroika is "restructuring" or "rebuilding", which perfectly suits the restructuring of character's mentalities in the play in regards to homosexuality, such as Hannah Pitt's shift in views from being completely heterosexist to understanding and being friends with Louis, Prior and Belize (OED). As the most devout character in the text, thoroughly Mormon Hannah Pitt is referred to as Mother Pitt for a good deal of the play. In the Bible, Hannah is one of the most prominent mothers named, her situation paralleling Sarah's in the struggle of infertility, then the blessing of a son (*Bible Gateway*). This perhaps explains Hannah Pitt's bitterness towards life, since in the Church of the Latter Day Saints, Mormons are encouraged to have large families, but her only child is Joe, who has now confessed his homosexuality to her.

Hannah's portrayal in the play begins as completely asexual – referred to either as "Momma" or "Mother Pitt". The mother figure in the world is so often deprived of all sexuality, a trend which Hannah Pitt follows for most of the play, until she finally meets the Angel (Weisskopf). When Hannah encounters the Angel, she is terrified, and tries to fend her off, saying "I didn't call you, you're his fever dream not mine!" The Angel replies by kissing her forehead, then her lips, in what the text describes as a "long hot kiss" (*Perestroika* 120). The Angel's only words to Hannah are "The Body is the Garden of the Soul", and as the Angel flies away, Hannah has "an enormous orgasm," which in the screen adaptation is accompanied by fireworks and a heavenly chorus. This plays into the concept created by Alfred Kinsey that

sexuality is not a solidly black or white subject. While the Kinsey scale does not cover every single possibility of sexual identity, it was the first scale to identify the possibility of sexual fluidity, and the idea that sexual preference can change over time (*Kinsey Institute*) This could easily apply to Hannah, Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt. Hannah's only experience with homosexuality is presumably this single experience, but for Roy Cohn, who claims he's not homosexual, but just fucks other men on occasion, or Joe Pitt, who loves his wife, but is sexually attracted to men, it shows that sexuality is a very personalized experience that cannot be generalized. Prior himself portrays this. As a thoroughly gay man, Prior gets an erection anytime the Angel is around, and even has sex with the Angel (and her seven vaginas). Sexuality in *Angels in America* is portrayed just as sexuality truly is in real life – intricate and complex.

Over time, the response to *Angels in America* has varied based on class and education level. When the first part of the play premiered on Broadway, it received raving reviews from the *New York Times*, a newspaper that primarily serves a more educated community. The review stated that *Angels in America* was “a true American work in its insistence on embracing all possibilities in art and life”. That really sums up who the preliminary audience for *Angels in America* was (Rich). The play was created to educate the educated. Not everyone goes to see Broadway-it's a cultural marker, a point strengthened by the fact that ticket prices set a record at \$60 top. Ten years later, when the play was adapted for the screen, *Variety* gave it a strong rating- one that perhaps was even stronger than the ratings the play received (McCarthy). While the screen adaptation occurred at such a later point in time, when AIDS and gay issues were not hot topics in public consciousness, according to the review, *Angels in America* still withstands the test of time. They even go so far as to transfer the concepts of *Angels in America* to modern

day politics, comparing the politics Kushner's liberal characters fight against to the more modern George W. Bush initiatives.

The review's perspective of the HBO series versus the play say:

It's by paying close attention to the emotional dynamics suggested by these and other developments that Kushner and Nichols early on anchor viewer interest in their film; in a way that wasn't quite so consistently the case onstage, you really become anxious to know what's going to happen next with the slowly expanding roster of mutually involved characters. Paradoxically, this devotion to the quotidian serves to more intimately connect the fantastic elements to their human sources, creating less of a separation between them. Due to this tight-knittedness as well as to the seamless and quite wonderful special effects, "Angels of America" seems more completely coherent and all of a piece than it ever did before. (McCarthy)

Usually, when a stage production is adapted for either the big screen or the small screen, it tends to lose its charm, what keeps the audience engaged and on the edge of their seats.

However, Kushner wisely employed great cinematic techniques to retain audience attention, keeping most of the charm of the theater.

While the *New Yorker* agrees to an extent about the success of the adaptation, their review raises an important point. For the adaptation, the subtitle of the play: "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" was eliminated. Perhaps this was for educatory purposes – assuming the audience coming to the screen would be more open, not needing to be hit over the head with the description, but the more likely answer is opposite on the situation. With such a conservative title when one doesn't know about the subtext of the play, it's quite easy to mistake this for a less liberal piece than it is. Possibly this was done for marketing purposes, to increase viewership and as not to discourage more conservative viewers who were merely looking at TV guides to determine what they want to watch.



Fast forward from the early 1980's to Christmas Eve 1989 and we have a group of friends, Mark, Roger and Collins who are broke and desperately trying to find a way to pay their "Rent" that had supposedly been covered by Benny, their former roommate, now landlord. Both Roger and Collins have AIDS, a fact that is alluded to in the second song of the musical. Interestingly, both "Angels in America" and "Rent" both begin with the same themes- that of life, death and the past. As sung by Mark and Roger:

How do you leave the past behind  
 When it keeps finding ways to get to your heart?  
 It reaches way down deep and tears you inside out  
 'Til you're torn apart, rent

How can you connect in an age  
 Where strangers, landlords, lovers  
 Your own blood cells betray?  
 What binds the fabric together  
 When the raging, shifting winds of change  
 Keep ripping away?

Fascinatingly enough, until one listens to the songs, one thinks of the term 'Rent' referencing to the actual rent that the boys were behind on at the start of the musical. However, the term 'rent' can also mean torn apart, which is one of the reasons Jonathan Larson titled the musical as he did (OED). If one takes a moment to think about it, that is what the entire musical is about.

Emotionally, the past and the present rip the characters apart, while they face the internal battle of their bodies being torn apart, ravaged and rent by HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, the 'renting' and being torn apart wasn't even confined to the body- AIDS rent the community, tearing apart friends and family. The double stigma was not only experienced by AIDS victims, but it also extended to their respective families. Most of the shame comes not from the illness itself, but the

fact that the disease was associated with risk taking behaviors such as commercial sex and drug use. In places such as Nigeria, Taiwan and China, whole families are shunned, often called “AIDS families” by their communities, and the United States at this time, while growing in knowledge, was not an exception in all cases (Li).

On his way to the apartment, Collins is assaulted by a gang and left bloodied and mugged on the ground. Suddenly, a transgender street percussionist, Angel shows up, seemingly out of nowhere, to help him, living up to her name. She picks up Collins and offers to help him clean up, explaining that “I kinda have to hurry, I’m on my way to a Life Support meeting- it’s for people with AIDS, people like me,” to which Collins replies, “Me too”. In the meantime, Mark gets worried, and decides to go look for Collins, reminding Roger to “take your AZT,” in such an offhand manner that normalizes the use of the medication, versus *Angels in America*, where AZT was still nearly impossible to attain. Roy Cohn had to pull all the strings he could to acquire the medication, whereas Roger and Mimi in *Rent*, while living in relative poverty, are still able to access the medicine. In a manner that proves just how much time has made a difference in the perspective on AIDS: the syndrome is no longer relegated to homosexuals, but Mimi, an exotic dancer, and Roger, a rock guitar player and aspiring composer, both have AIDS, but end up in a relationship together. They contracted the syndrome through drug use and shared needles, not through sexual intercourse, which takes away from the concept of ‘punishment for homosexuals’ that had been one of the earlier theories regarding AIDS.

Roger’s storyline in the film differs slightly from the plotline of the musical. The movie whitewashes his AIDS scenario, possibly to appeal to a larger audience. In the movie, Roger’s [now dead] girlfriend goes through the struggle with him, dying of AIDS, whereas in the musical, April slits her wrists in the bathroom, leaving Roger a note saying “We have AIDS”.

Over the period of time when The film follows his struggle with not only the disease, but with the residual guilt he suffers from. Roger's song "Glory" illuminates the pressure he feels as a musician to write "one song to leave behind.... one last refrain ...before the sun sets... one song...before the virus takes hold- one blaze of glory ". He refers to the song as "an eternal flame/ from the soul of a young man/ one song to redeem this empty life", saying that "time flies/ time dies." Youth has always been about immortality and living forever, but Roger faces a time stamp- a deadline. He knows that he will die, and so his race against time begins.

Roger engages in a struggle through the film, both against his inner guilt and to find the perfect song to leave behind in a glorious blaze of immortality. This occurs in the real world as well- famous artist David Bowie knew he was dying of cancer when he released his last album "Lazarus", the title speaking for what he hoped the music would do- carry him into immortality, and allow him to metaphorically 'rise again'. Roger finally writes the song that brings him "glory, in the eyes of a young girl", but only at the end of the story after he comes to term with his guilt.

By Christmas day, Angel has acquired a new benefactor for her percussion, but instead of keeping the money for herself, Angel Dumott Schunard becomes a Christ figure in the film. Collins shows up with Stolli vodka and food, paid for by Angel, with money she earned from a special performance. Her song "Today for you -- tomorrow for me" is all about her helping out Mark, Roger and Collins 'today', and herself 'tomorrow'. Dressed in bright Santa Clause drag, she is a far cry from the physical image of Jesus the public is accustomed to, but her character goes about spreading love and peace. She never discriminates based on sexuality, or whether or not someone has AIDS, inviting Mark to the Life Support meeting on Christmas. When Angel dies eventually, she does not rise as Jesus did on the third day, but a year from the date she met

Collins, when Mimi dies from AIDS, Angel resurrects her. According to Mimi, “I was heading towards this warm bright light, and Angel was there. She said, turn around girlfriend and listen to that boy’s song”, to which Roger replies, “Thank God this moment’s not the last”, having finally come to appreciate life for what it is, instead of being caught and trapped in his past.

The characters of Maureen and Joanne also strike against stereotypical images. Maureen is a bisexual performance artist, and Joanne is a lesbian attorney. The fact that Joanne can be successful and open about her sexual preferences, and still a successful attorney points to the less judgmental society of the late 80’s and early 90’s in comparison to the panic about homosexuality exhibited in *Angels in America*. Furthermore, when Mark asks Joanne where she learned to tango, her reply is “With the French ambassador’s daughter in her dorm room at Miss Porter’s” (*The Tango Maureen*), implying that she comes from a family of wealth and status.

While Life Support meetings are not heavily focused on in the film, they really play a crucial role in providing a broader perspective of AIDS, not just people who have been living with it for years. When Mark attends his first Life Support meeting, he comes with his bag and camera crashing around in the relatively quiet room used for the meetings, making a contrast against the people already in the circle who have AIDS. As he comes in, they are introducing themselves, and when they look to him, his immediate reflex response is “Oh I’m not... that is to say I don’t have...” before settling in and introducing himself. This scene strikes me as important for two reasons- first, even though the stigma of having AIDS is not quite as bad as it was in the early 80’s, Mark still rushes to make it known that he’s not a victim. Furthermore, for once, the person who does not have AIDS is the outsider, compared to society, where AIDS victims are always the outsiders. A question asked in the Life Support meeting is “Why choose fear?” –

which casts light on the way that AIDS victims were living – in fear. One of the members of the Life Support group explains that

I find some of what you teach suspect,  
because I'm used to relying on intellect,  
but I try to open up to what I don't know  
Because reason says  
I should have died three years ago  
There's only us  
There's only this  
Forget regret  
Or life is yours to miss  
No other road  
No other way  
No day but today.

The song sums up how many people felt about AIDS at the time. There was not enough clear research about it, and theories about the syndrome were still rooted in skepticism and doubt. The song claims that to forget regret, or you'll miss life, especially if you don't have long to live. The song carries over to Mimi and Roger, with Mimi saying "It feels too damn much like home when the Spanish babies cry," urging Roger to come with her to come do drugs to forget "all the scars from the nevers and maybes.. Roger pushes her off, telling her, "looking for romance, come back another day." Drugs have ruined his life and love ruined his life, and he wants to be as far away from both as possible. Mimi's response is, "I trust my soul, my only goal is just to be," which might seem as though it focuses only on loving Roger, but it also addresses her life with AIDS. Her primary goal in life is to live – to have "another day" to come back, instead of dying before she has that chance.

One of the most touching life support songs sung in the film is “Will I lose my dignity?”, where the life support attendees ask:

Will I lose my dignity  
 Will someone care  
 Will I wake tomorrow  
 From this nightmare?

Both Roger and Mark attend that particular session, and the song reflects on those who not only have AIDS, but every single person. There’s no guarantee that anyone will retain their dignity in death. At some point, everyone will die, and each death is different. We hope that someone will be there to care for us, to mourn for us, but AIDS victims didn’t have that guarantee. The disease ripped apart families, friends, even lovers, as shown in *Angels in America* when Louis leaves Prior because he can’t handle dealing with the hemorrhaging and associated symptoms.

However, AIDS could also bring people together, strengthening the love they had for each other. In the song, “I’ll Cover You”, Angel and Collins promise each other, “When you’re worn out and tired, I’ll cover you, when your heart has expired, oh, lover, I’ll cover you”. In *Rent*, none of the characters who have AIDS have any family members. Whether because of their condition, or other life choices, it has been bad enough that no family come to help them, to take care of them during their time of need. Prior from *Angels in America* faces the same issue. When he’s dying of AIDS, Belize and Mother Pitt are the only people he has to take care of him.

The song “La Vie Bohème” is a celebration of life, but hold so many important concepts in it. One of the lines is “bisexuals, trisexuals, homo sapiens...” It speaks powerfully as to what one of the messages of *Rent* is. No matter what your sexuality is, you are human, and should be treated as one. Who you love is no one’s business but your own. Another line in the song claims

that “sodomy, it’s between God and me, to S and M”, rather making a statement on the former belief people held that AIDS was a moral disease, again, claiming that what happened in the bedroom was not the business of the public. At the end of “La Vie Bohème Part A”, Roger and Mimi have a short interlude, called “I Should Tell You” in which Roger discovers Mimi also has AIDS. “Here goes, trusting desire, starting to learn, walking through fire without a burn,”, as the two start a romance, knowing that they could easily lose one another. “La Vie Bohème Part B” focuses on specializations of various characters, specifying that anarchy is “revolution, justice, screaming for solutions, forcing changes, risk and danger, making noise and making pleas” which strongly ties into the LGBTQ movement and the fact that for some people, making pleas is making noise. However, while they might close their ears, eventually screaming for solutions is going to win. “To faggots, lezzies, dykes, cross dressers too,” is a lyric that takes terms that were originally negative and flips them around to take ownership, continuing to say, “To people living with, not dying from disease- let he among us without sin be the first to condemn La vie Bohème!” That’s how the film chooses to sum up the first act. People live with AIDS, and they fight with everything they have- they are survivors.

Seasons of Love part two opens up with a darker version of the original song, asking how you measure “A last year on earth”, once again, reminding us to “figure in love”. While the second act opens up with the New Year, this sets the scene with a sense of foreboding. It’s winter, and certain characters are hitting winter as well. Joanne and Maureen go through a breakup, Mark and Roger are technically evicted, and 1990 does not get any better as the seasons change. The song “Without you” transitions from winter into spring and follows Mimi’s attempt to stop doing drugs as well as Angel’s declining health. Through the beginning of the song, it shows the Life Support gatherings, with different members fading away, bringing the viewers to

face the sad, bleak truth that the film has been avoiding till now- the fact that AIDS kills. Until now, the story has been about conquering the disease. The second act looks at what happens when you can't conquer it, the bleakness and pain of slowly dying. The themes found in the play, are mirrored in real life, with Jonathan Larson, one of the lyricists of the show dying just before the premiere. Now, twenty years later, as *Rent* is going through a revival, those themes still hold relevant today.

Collins holds Angel on the subway as he suffers from a fever and chills. Roger holds Mimi as she trembles and shakes, experiencing symptoms of withdrawal. “Without you, the eyes gaze, the legs walk, the lungs breathe, the mind churns, the heart yearns, the tears dry without you. Life goes on, but I’m gone, ‘cause I die without you”. The song goes from showing a happy Angel, supporting others at life support, to surrounded by friends at the hospital, to dying in Collins’s arms, pale and covered in sores from Kaposi’s sarcoma. Angel’s funeral speaks of her originality, the time she led strangers out of Alphabet City, helping those who couldn’t help themselves, and her unconditional love for those around her. Collins and Joanne sing a reprise of “I’ll cover you”, bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase,

A new lease you are my love, all my life  
 I’ve longed to discover something as true as this is  
 When your heart has expired  
 oh lover  
 I’ll cover you.

In the first rendition of the song, it was about hope, and the opportunity to live and love, despite having AIDS. Instead, this rendition is about loss. Loss of life, of friendship, as Angel was the



glue holding everything together. AIDS has gradually destroyed everything the characters of the play have loved.

The song “Living in America” specifically addresses the general population.

Don't think all day  
dive into work  
drive the other way/  
that drip of hurt  
That pint of shame  
Goes away just play the game.

The song lays the blame on every person who ignores the signs, saying “You're living in America at the end of the millennium, leave your conscious at the tone.” It talks about “connections in an isolating age.” AIDS itself is an isolator. People are so quick to judge, to find someone to point fingers at. With the AIDS epidemic, the general public pointed fingers at the LGBTQ population, and it wasn't until the time of *Rent*, in the 1990's when people were able to take those stigmas and start reversing them.

With new discoveries, and more educated perspectives, things began to change slowly. While it's not true that everyone is open minded and perfectly understanding of the AIDS situation, even now in 2016, with education has come acceptance. Humanity is not perfect, but as portrayed in both *Angels in America* and *Rent*, it is never too late to change. Slowly, the world is shifting their perspective, and realizing that AIDS is a disease, just like any other, one that needs to be researched and treated, but that ultimately it should not act as a stigma to isolate or create prejudices against members of the LGBTQ society.

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