ANGELS IN AMERICA
Part One: Millennium Approaches
Study Guide

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City Lights Theater Company of San Jose

Angels in America
Part One: Millennium Approaches

By Tony Kushner
Directed by Kit Wilder

Production Dates: September 14 – October 15, 2006

I. The Play

A. Synopsis

ANGELS IN AMERICA is a provocative and theatrical play that follows two couples whose lives become entangled amidst the setting of the devastating AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Louis Ironson and Prior Walter are a homosexual couple living in New York City. Their lives together are comfortable until Prior discovers that he has contracted the AIDS virus. Louis becomes unable to cope with Prior’s illness and slowly begins to detach himself from Louis, whom he at times believes to be a considerable burden. Joseph Porter (Joe) and Harper Amaty Pitt are a married couple who have recently moved to New York from Salt Lake City. Joe is a closeted homosexual who has fought his sexual identity under the guises of his Mormon religion. This situation has taken its toll on his wife, Harper, who is an agoraphobic with a mild Valium addiction.

Joe and Louis work together at the Second Circuit Court of Appeals where Louis is a word processor and Joe is chief clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson. Their paths cross one day and the two begin a relationship. Harper and Prior meet in a strange double dream where Harper confesses to Prior that she suspects husband Joe to be homosexual. A number of other characters weave in and out of the story, including Prior’s former lover Belize (a nurse and former drag queen), Joe’s mother Hannah, and various political, religious and dream-induced figures. Also essential to the play is Roy Cohn, a powerful lawyer whose bigotry and fear come to represent the weaknesses of society as a whole.

B. Setting & Characters

Setting
October 1985 to February 1986, primarily in New York City, with a few scenes in Salt Lake City, Moscow and heaven and hell via dream sequences.

Characters (as detailed in the script)
Roy M. Cohn - A successful New York lawyer and unofficial power broker
Joseph Porter Pitt – chief clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson, Federal Court of Appeals, Second Circuit
Harper Amaty Pitt – Joe’s wife, an agoraphobic with a mild Valium addiction
Louis Ironson – A word processor working for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals
Prior Walter – Louis’s boyfriend. Occasionally works as a club designer or caterer, otherwise lives very modestly but with great style off a small trust fund
Hannah Porter Pitt – Joe’s mother, currently residing in Salt Lake City, living off her deceased husband’s army pension
Belize – a former drag queen and former lover of Prior’s. A registered nurse. Belize’s name was originally Norman Arriaga; Belize is a drag name that stuck.

The Angel – four divine emanations, Flour, Phosphor, Lumen and Candle; manifest in One: the Continental Principality of America. She has magnificent steel-gray wings.

Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz – an orthodox Jewish rabbi, played by the actor playing Hannah.

Mr. Lies – Harper’s imaginary friend, a travel agent, who in style of dress and speech suggests a jazz musician; he always wears a large lapel badge emblazoned “IOTA” (The International Order of Travel Agents). He is played by the actor playing Belize.

The Man in the Park – played by the actor playing Prior.

The Voice – the voice of The Angel.

Henry – Roy’s doctor, played by the actor playing Hannah.

Emily – a nurse, played by the actor playing The Angel.

Martin Heller – a Reagan Administration Justice Department flackman played by the actor playing Harper.

Sister Ella Chapman – a Salt Lake City real-estate saleswoman, played by the actor playing The Angel.

Prior I – The ghost of a dead Prior Walter from the 13th century, played by the actor playing Joe. He is a blunt, gloomy medieval farmer with a guttural Yorkshire accent.

Prior II – the ghost of a dead Prior Walter from the 17th century, played by the actor playing Roy. He is a Londoner, sophisticated, with a High British accent.

The Eskimo – played by the actor playing Joe.

The Woman in the South Bronx – played by the actor playing The Angel.

Ethel Rosenberg – played by the actor playing Hannah.
C. About the Playwright

“Tony Kushner was born in 1956 in New York City, but his family soon moved to Louisiana, where his father ran the family lumberyard. His parents were classical musicians, and their home was filled with art. Kushner dates his interest in theater to early memories of seeing his mother onstage. He also recollects from childhood "fairly clear memories of being gay since I was six." He did not, however "come out" until after he tried psychotherapy to change his sexual orientation. After finishing his undergraduate education at Columbia University, Kushner studied directing in graduate school at New York University, partly because he was not confident of his chances to become a playwright. Among his early plays are (1985), a children's play produced in St. Louis; Stella (1987), an adaptation from Goethe produced in New York; A Bright Room Called Day (1987), produced in San Francisco; and The Illusion (1988), adapted from Corneille, produced in New York, then in Hartford in 1990.

He worked with Argentinean playwright Ariel Dorfman to adapt Dorfman's Widows, produced in Los Angeles in 1991. A Bright Room Called Day, about left-wing politics in Nazi Germany, was not well reviewed after its New York production in 1991. Frank Rich, for example, said it was "an early front-runner for the most infuriating play of 1991." But some people saw in it the power that was to show up later in his work. The Eureka Theater in San Francisco commissioned him to write a play that ultimately turned out to be Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (1992), the play that catapulted him to international prominence.

Among Kushner's current projects is a series of three plays that he describes as having money as its subject—meaning, in part, the effects of economics, in the forms of both poverty and wealth, on individuals. The first of these plays, to be titled Henry Box Brown, centers on the true story of an African American who escaped slavery by being smuggled out of the South in a crate. Brown eventually made his way to England where he joined with a number of other former slaves in producing dramatic "panoramas" intended to discourage the English from buying slave-picked cotton, on which their textile industry largely relied. Kushner has said, "I've always been drawn to writing historical characters. . . . The best stories are the ones you find in history."1

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D. Historical Context

In order to fully appreciate ANGELS IN AMERICA, one must consider the AIDS epidemic in America (particularly during the 1980s), the Reagan administration and its response to the AIDS crisis, and the general stigma regarding homosexuality. The 1980s were a decade of conflict and contradiction that combined the final strained relations of the Cold War with the emergence of new media forms such as MTV. The decade saw a number of important and iconic events, including America’s boycott of the 1980 Olympics held in Moscow, attempted assassinations of President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, and the first reports of homosexual men dying due to a mysterious attack on the bodies’ immune system which would become known to all as AIDS.

The first reported cases of AIDS occurred in 1981, at which point is was a mysterious disease with little to nothing known of its origins, its affected population or its treatment options. It would be three entire years until the AIDS virus was discovered. In April of 1984, Washington US Health Secretary Margaret Heckler announced what she considered to be a monumental breakthrough in AIDS research. The variant of the virus had been identified and a blood test was to be developed and possibly ready in six months time that could identify the virus. There were further suggestions that a vaccine to prevent the virus could be ready to test in two years. In June of 1985 the Food and Drug Administration gave permission for human testing, and the first AIDS patient received AZT on July 3, 1985.

Homosexuality in men and women has been a somewhat unspoken part of worldwide culture throughout the ages; however, the onset of AIDS and its connection to the homosexual community cast it into the limelight. Ignorance and fear were rampant across America, and AIDS was perceived by some conservative religious groups to be the fulfillment of punishment for homosexual behavior by a vengeful god. The gay community was frequently divided by outrage and anger about the conservative response to AIDS in its struggle for acceptance by mainstream society.

For many in the gay community, President Ronald Reagan was the representation of the mainstream’s inability to accept their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Reagan and the general public failed to recognize the AIDS epidemic as a legitimate predicament and Reagan has since been heavily criticized for his lack of response to the AIDS epidemic. It was not until March of 1987 that the Reagan administration acknowledged the growing pandemic of AIDS.

ANGELS IN AMERICA (which includes Part One: Millennium Approaches and Part Two: Perestroika) telescopes these huge political issues into a more focused story, dealing with the individual people who are affected by them. At the same time, it opens the audience to wonder and hope through the use of theatrical elements. The importance of the subject matter, combined with the artistry of the storytelling, garnered the play numerous awards including the Tony Award, the Drama Desk Award and the Kennedy Centre Award (Parts One and Two) and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Part One).

**Timeline: AIDS Epidemic**

*Key events, important people, activism and breakthroughs 1981-2006*

_by David Johnson and Shmuel Ross_

*(excerpted)*

1981 “Gay Cancer,” later called GRID, (Gay Related Immuni Deficiency) claims 121 U.S. lives since the mid-1970s

1982 Scientists call the new disease AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Center for Disease Control says sexual contract or infected blood could transmit AIDS; U.S. begins formal tracking of all AIDS cases. 285 cases reported in 17 U.S. states, five European countries

1983 Dr. Robert Gallo of the National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, and Dr. Luc Montagnier of France’s Pasteur Institute independently identify Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS

1985 Movie actor Rock Hudson dies of AIDS; the resulting publicity greatly increases AIDS awareness. Congress allocates $70 M for AIDS research. First international AIDS conference held in Atlanta. Blood test for HIV approved; screening of U.S. blood supply begins
1986   Soviet Union reports first AIDS case. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop sends AIDS information to all U.S. households. Scientists locate second type of AIDS virus, HIV-2, in West Africa; original virus is HIV-1
1987   FDA approves AZT, a potent new AIDS drug, which prolongs the lives of some patients by reducing infections
1988   World Health Organization begins World AIDS Day to focus attention on fighting the disease
1991   10 million people worldwide estimated to be HIV-positive, including 1 million in U.S.; more than 36,000 Americans have died of AIDS since the late 1970s.
1992   Clinical trials begin using multiple drugs. FDA begins accelerated approval of experimental AIDS drugs
1994   AIDS-related illnesses are the leading cause of death for adults 25-44 years old in U.S.
1995   Saquinavir, the first protease inhibitor which reduces the ability of AIDS to spread to new cells, is approved
1996   Patients are often able to delay the onset of full-blown AIDS by taking a combination of as many as 60 different drugs called an AIDS "cocktail." AIDS is 8th leading cause of death in U.S.
1997   Worldwide death toll climbs to 6.5 million. U.S. government spends $4.5 billion on AIDS/HIV treatment. AIDS-related illnesses drop to the fifth leading cause of death for adults 25-44 years old
1998   Clinical trials began for AIDS vaccine, AIDSVAX, the only one of 40 AIDS vaccines developed since 1987, that is considered promising enough to widely test on human volunteers, U.S. AIDS deaths drop to 17,000 per year, due to drug therapies; AIDS drops to 14th leading cause of death in U.S.
1999   AIDS cases in Russia rise by one-third to 360,000; World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that AIDS has caused the life expectancy in Southern Africa to drop from 59 years in the early 1990's to 45 years after 2005; AIDS infections skyrocket in Southeast Asia; U.S. government spends $6.9 billion on AIDS/HIV treatment
2000   Officials note the spread of drug-resistant strains of HIV; 21.8 million people have died of AIDS since the late 1970s; infections rise in Eastern Europe, Russia, India and Southeast Asia; 10% of the population between the ages of 15 and 49 has HIV/AIDS in 16 African countries, while in 7 African countries, infection rates reach 20%
2001   The UN estimates that, worldwide in 2001, there were 3 million deaths from AIDS, of which 2.3 million were in Sub-Saharan Africa. 5 million new cases bring the total to 40 million infected. Africa has the most infected, followed by South and Southeast Asia. AIDS is spreading most rapidly in Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation.
2002   HIV is the leading cause of death worldwide for those 15-59; FDA approves the first rapid finger-prick AIDS test
2003   President Bush announces PEPFAR, a $15 billion, 5-year plan to combat AIDS in African and Caribbean nations; WHO announces the "3 by 5" initiative, aiming to provide AIDS drugs to 3 million people in poor countries by 2005
2004   FDA approves a saliva-based AIDS test. A study finds that 95% of those with AIDS live in the developing world. From 1981 through the end of 2004, more than 20 million people have died of AIDS
2005   FDA begins approving generic AIDS drugs, enabling U.S. funded programs to provide more cost-effective treatments to poorer nations. The number of people living with HIV in 2005 reached its highest level ever- an estimated 40.3 million people, nearly half of them women.
2006   June 5 marks the 25th anniversary of the first journal article (in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report) about what would become identified as AIDS. A UN report issued the week before reports both good and bad news: Good news: Many countries have achieved targets set in 2001, reducing the number of new infections and providing antiretroviral therapy to more victims. HIV testing, counseling, and education are all up. In many sub-Saharan countries, more young teens are staying abstinent, and condom use is increasing. And with 126 nations reporting, investigators have more data than ever. Bad news: Goals for youth education and prevention services aren’t being met, those most at risk for AIDS are often not reached, many countries fell far short of all goals, and social issues underlying the spread of AIDS are being ignored. In short, “A quarter century into the epidemic, the global AIDS response stands at a crossroads. For the first time ever the world possesses the means to begin to reverse the epidemic. But success will require unprecedented willingness on the part of all actors in the global response to fulfill their potential, to embrace new ways of working with each other, and to . . . sustain the response over the long term.”
E. Production History

ANGELS IN AMERICA was commissioned by the Eureka Theatre Company of San Francisco and developed by Tony Kushner with the Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles (at which it received a workshop production). The World Premiere of ANGELS IN AMERICA Part One: Millennium Approaches was presented by The Eureka Theatre Company in May 1991. It was directed by David Esbjornson. Sets were designed by Tom Kamm, costumes by Sandra Woodall, and lights by Jack Carpenter and Jim Cave. The cast was as follows:

ROY COHN…………………………………………………………………………………………….John Bellucci
JOE PITT………………………………………………………………………………………..Michael Scott Ryan
HARPER PITT………………………………………………………………………………………...Anne Darragh
BELIZE…………………………………………………………………………………………………Harry Waters Jr.
LOUIS IRONSON………………………………………………………………………………….Michael Ornstein
PRIOR WALTER…………………………………………………………………………………..Stephen Spinella
HANNAH PITT……………………………………………………………………………………Kathleen Chalfant
THE ANGEL……………………………………………………………………………………….Ellen McLaughlin

The play opened next in London in January 1992 at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain in a production directed by Declan Donellan. Later, a production of ANGELS IN AMERICA, Parts One and Two ran in repertory at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, directed by Oskar Eustis and Tony Taccone. ANGELS IN AMERICA received its Broadway premiere at the Walter Kerr Theatre in April 1993, in a production directed by George C. Wolfe. The play went on to receive numerous international productions. In 2003, HBO created a miniseries based on the play, adapted by Tony Kushner and directed by Mike Nichols. The lead cast featured:

ROY COHN…………………………………………………………………………………………….Al Pacino
JOE PITT………………………………………………………………………………………..Patrick Wilson
HARPER PITT………………………………………………………………………………………...Mary-Louise Parker
BELIZE…………………………………………………………………………………………………Jeffrey Wright
LOUIS IRONSON…………………………………………………………………………………..Ben Shenkman
PRIOR WALTER…………………………………………………………………………………..Justin Kirk
HANNAH PITT……………………………………………………………………………………Meryl Streep
THE ANGEL……………………………………………………………………….……….Emma Thompson

City Lights Theater Company of San Jose’s production of ANGELS IN AMERICA Part One: Millennium Approaches is scheduled to run September 14-October 15, 2006. It was directed by Kit Wilder. Scenic design was by Ron Gasparinetti; costume design was by Joanne Martin, lighting design was by Brendan Bartholomew; properties design was by Clary Alward; the stage manager was Michelle Sams. The cast was as follows:

ROY COHN…………………………………………………………………………………………….Kevin Kirby
JOE PITT………………………………………………………………………………………..Jeff Clarke
HARPER PITT………………………………………………………………………………………...Julianne Arnall
BELIZE…………………………………………………………………………………………………Lance Gardner
LOUIS IRONSON…………………………………………………………………………………..Jason Arias
PRIOR WALTER…………………………………………………………………………………..Tomas Theriot
HANNAH PITT……………………………………………………………………………………Shareen Merriam
THE ANGEL……………………………………………………………………….……….Gemma Beddo Barozzi
II. The Production

A. Style and Concept (Scenic Designer Ron Gasparinetti)

The style of ANGELS IN AMERICA is an example of mystic realism. In this style, realistic characters and language combine with a narrative that is at times linear and at times "out of joint" (for instance, the dream/hallucination sequence between Prior and Harper). Everyday settings, such as an apartment, are followed by extraordinary excursions across space/time. For example, the script specifies that Antarctica is actually a setting—although we understand that Harper’s jaunt to the icy wilderness with Mr. Lies is a product of her pills, we actually join her there rather than seeing her in her apartment imagining it. Finally, mystic realism combines everyday occurrences with themes and figures of epic proportions, such as the AIDS epidemic and the Angel. In this style, performers can use a technique such as Psychological American Realism, as opposed to a more stylized approach such as that required by farce or tragedy.

City Lights’ Resident Scenic Designer Ron Gasparinetti worked with director Kit Wilder to create a design that would reflect this tenuous balance. Following is the thought process behind the concept and design for the production.

“There is a line in the show, 'In the next century, I think everyone will be insane.' The dreaded disease in which Mr. Kushner contains his story is a perfect metaphor of the situation in which we are living today....this "next century". Anyone can get it, you don't know how or when and there is no way to prevent or cure it. Terrorist activity could affect any one of us at any moment, the Internet has made it easier and faster for the deranged, the predator, the thief, and the liar to exploit innocent unsuspecting individuals, people are shot because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, the proliferation of travel allows viruses, harmful plants and insects to blanket the globe in a matter of weeks, our water (all too often) is unsafe. Rogue nations, insane dictators and religious zealots could unleash worldwide catastrophe with nuclear weaponry in an instant.

The Bible states that in the end times "knowledge will be increased....". That statement sounds like a wonderful thing. In reality, we have available to us more information and "knowledge" than we know what to do with. We are so very aware of everything that is going on in the world and updates are sent to us at moments notice. We know about the terrorists, and the predators and the viruses and the nuclear threats almost instantly. We are all on edge, constantly. When one stays on edge for an extended period of time, especially when there's no end in sight, one does in fact start going insane. What a prediction this play makes! But how to represent that scenically?

Our society was once a beautiful, ornate slab of intricately designed marble work. Flat, polished, perfect. A triumphant archway towered over us celebrating our accomplishments, victories and strength as a nation. We were blissfully ignorant of the fact that invincibility does not last forever. AIDS attacked.... SMASH!......a sledgehammer blow to our beautiful marble floor. The internet attacks.... SMASH! another blow to that gorgeous floor. September 11...SMASH!......our triumphant archway crumbles to the ground. Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea....SMASH!......our trust in our once solid floor is now seriously compromised. When will the next blow come? Who will save us? What is the message that we need to hear, to learn? There are no more Angels in America. Will the next blow be the last?”
B. Special Challenges (Director Kit Wilder)

“ANGELS IN AMERICA is, both at first glance at after some study, an enormous play. It encompasses not only life-altering crisis points in the lives of many characters but also a great many sweeping human issues that affect all of us, as well as key socio-political issues central to our particular way of life as Americans. It is structurally and thematically “Shakespearian” in scope: that is, it has been written in several acts, each of which is comprised of many scenes. While this structure is reflective of the “universality” of the play’s themes, and reinforces the notion that the plight of each character is actually being played out on the “world stage,” it is however quite challenging to a modern director keen on presenting a piece of theatre that is not daunting to the audience.

One of the central challenges any director of ANGELS IN AMERICA faces, then, is the need to arrive at a style of presentation – technically and performance-oriented – that is swift, ongoing, fluid, and contiguous. That is, it is essential for the play to be one conceptually, thematically, and technically unified whole. Given the scope of the play, however, this can be quite a trick: within three acts, the play is comprised of twenty-six separate scenes; within those scenes, the play takes place in no fewer than twenty-three separate locations! It would be all-too-easy, therefore, for the play to be presented in a disjointed, stop-and-start fashion, with countless blackouts and scene changes to accommodate the various locations that are, needless to say, essential to the tale the playwright is telling.

The solution or solutions to this particular problem of “continuity” in ANGELS IN AMERICA can only be derived from collaborative effort, as it affects all technical aspects of the production – setting, lighting, costuming, sound – as well as the overall style of performance. The set itself must lend itself to a “seamless” style of staging that allows for simple and swift scene changes, and must also therefore reflect a more “metaphoric” style of production that puts the emphasis on performance rather than scenic reality. The lighting, too, contributes to the seamless, fluid progress of the play; indeed, very rarely can the stage go black if the audience is to remain fully engaged, even through scene changes. And sound, ultimately, serves as the sensory and emotional “glue” that allows the audience to shift, effortlessly, from one “place” to another with the characters themselves. All of this, of course, means that a great burden is placed on costuming to assist both the actors and the audience to “believe” the story as it is told: within a conceptually “stylized” world of set, light, and sound, only the clothes the characters wear is actually “real.”

Fortunately, all of this is supported and encouraged by the playwright himself. In his introduction and notes on the play, Tony Kushner encourages a “pared down” style of performance that is “actor-driven” and in which there are no blackouts and scene changes only as necessary to support what the actors are doing on the stage. I can only hope that Mr. Kushner would be pleased with our efforts; it is the ultimately responsibility of a production team, after all – director, designers, actors, and crew – to tell the story told by the playwright, and to be as true as possible to the vision he or she shares through the text.”
C. The Actors at Work

The cast of City Lights Theater Company's production of *ANGELS IN AMERICA Part One: Millennium Approaches* was a very talented and hardworking group of theatre artists. Here, Lance Gardner (in the roles of Belize and Mr. Lies) and Kevin Kirby (in the role of Roy Cohn and other supporting characters) relate some of their understanding of the play and their work in the production.

1) *ANGELS IN AMERICA* has had a huge impact on American theatre. Why do you think this is?

LANCE: Because the "American theatre" thrives on mediocrity but silently and passionately lusts for gems such as Angels. Angels in America is a model of form and content that firmly stands amongst a very few palatable works of American Drama.

KEVIN: I think the impact has been huge because the play itself is huge. It's a show about politics, religion, sexual identity, AIDS, mental illness, and the countless ways in which we disappoint ourselves and the ones we love. Kushner does not take a particularly hopeful tone regarding any of these topics, but the scope and audacity of his imagination are thrilling. I think of "Angels" as a rare example of magical realism in American theatre. The world that Kushner describes is broken, dark, and all too familiar, but it is also a world in which miracles can occur.

In addition to the impressive breadth and daring of the story, there is another element that I suspect has been just as influential. Namely, Kushner's fearlessness as a playwright. He is not afraid to tackle controversial subject matter, not afraid to ask the big questions, not afraid to crack jokes in the face of tragedy, not afraid to stand as a moral voice in morally ambiguous times, not afraid to take his characters to depths of emotion usually reserved for Shakespeare or Sophocles, and certainly not afraid of being labeled as an intellectual or a liberal. "Angels" has to have been an incredibly liberating example for an entire generation of American playwrights.

2) In what ways are you like your character? In what ways are you different? How do you combine these factors into your performance?

LANCE: Both Belize and Mr. Lies are able to see more than what is before them. My ability to see a situation or a person from every aspect has given these characters a confidence and a groundedness. (In terms of what is different,) (T)hough I may be a bit outspoken at times I find these two to be downright outrageous. To portray such large people in such small and intimate situations is a fantastic struggle. It is that confidence and groundedness that they allow to come through that keeps me from going off the deep end.

KEVIN: My first impulse is to insist that I am in no way whatsoever like Roy Cohn. Unlike the other main characters in "Angels", Cohn is a real historical figure. He was Senator McCarthy's right hand man during the communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Much of his subsequent law practice involved defending organized crime leaders. His preferred legal strategy was to use his personal connections with powerful government figures to circumvent the legal process. He had a reputation for being ruthless and manipulative. In terms of politics (and probably personality), it's hard for me to imagine anyone less like myself.

But I must admit to one significant similarity: Roy Cohn loved to hear himself talk. As an actor, this is a trait that I can appreciate. Cohn relied on his ability to influence others with his words, to twist a conversation to his advantage. He loved a good argument. This has really been my "way in" with this character. It's the one thing about Roy that I can truly identify with, the thing that makes him a real, comprehensible human being rather than a distasteful archetype. I can't overstate how important this has been for me in approaching this role.
3) What is your favorite part of the play, and why?

LANCE: The exchange between Joe and Louis in the bathroom is one of the most charming scenes written in my lifetime by anyone other than Tom Stoppard. It is so honest and tender, but in such a clever way. It's the way everyone wishes that they could flirt.
KEVIN: My favorite scene in the play (and this is a very difficult choice) is probably the phone call between Joe and his mother. It's certainly not the flashiest scene, nor the funniest, nor the most gut-wrenchingly dramatic. I admire it simply because it feels so real, so emotionally honest. Joe's "confession" is a major turning point in his life, and yet he fumbles his way through it. Hannah's response -- the way her mind struggles to explain away the truth that she never wanted to hear-- is perfect. I think it's a beautiful piece of writing.

In terms of Roy's scenes, my favorites are the first and the last. The first shows Roy at the top of his game, convinced that he's in complete control of his world. By the end of the play his situation has changed drastically, he's fighting a disease that is beyond anyone's control, but he is still trying to impose his will on the world, still trying to talk his way out of the mess he's in. I love the contrast.
III. For Discussion

A. What to Look for As You Watch the Play

1. In this production, eight actors play a total of 21 characters. How does this enhance your understanding of the play? How would the production be different if there were more actors, with each playing only one character?

2. Which moments in the play are memorable to you? Which ones pulled you in because of their comedic tone, and which ones drew you because of their drama?

3. Consider the physical locales in which the play is set. In what ways are these locales important, both realistically and symbolically?

4. How do the design elements (set, lighting, costume, props and sound) contribute to your understanding of the play? What other choices could have been made for the design of the show, and how would that have made the experience different?

5. Choose one of the following characters to pay particular attention to throughout the play: Roy Cohn, Joe Pitt, Harper Pitt, Louis Ironson, or Prior Walter. What does this character most want to achieve or attain? What stands in his/ her way? How does the character change over the course of the play?
B. Quiz

1. Why is Mrs. Soffer upset with Roy?

2. What request does Joe make of Roy while Roy is talking on the phone?

3. What job offer does Roy make to Joe?

4. Who is Mr. Lies?

5. What does Mr. Lies do for a living?

6. What is Joe’s nickname for Harper?

7. What must Louis do immediately after Prior tells him he has the AIDS virus?

8. What does Harper think of Washington DC?

9. With what secret does Harper taunt Joe?

10. Near the end of Act One, what does Louis ask of Prior?

11. Henry diagnoses Roy as having AIDS. What is Roy’s reaction?

12. Where do Joe and Louis first meet and what is Louis doing at the time?

13. What does Prior disclose to Harper when they meet in their simultaneous hallucinating/dream scene?

14. What does Roy make Martin Heller do to prove he is loyal to him?

15. Who does Joe drunkenly telephone from a pay phone in the middle of the night?

16. What is the name of Belize’s favorite paperback novel?

17. Why book does Belize suggest Louis put down in order to read the abovementioned novel?

18. Once in Antarctica, what character does Harper conjure up to keep her from being lonely?

19. At the end of the play, who accompanies Louis to his home?

20. Who is the final person to appear to Prior, and what is his/ her message?
B. Quiz Anzwers

1. Why is Mrs. Soffer upset with Roy? *He missed a court date.*

2. What request does Joe make of Roy while Roy is talking on the phone? *To not take the Lord's name in vain.*

3. What job offer does Roy make to Joe? *He wants him to go to Washington and work for the Justice Department.*

4. Who is Mr. Lies? *Harper's imaginary friend*

5. What does Mr. Lies do for a living? *He is a travel agent.*

6. What is Joe's nickname for Harper? *Buddy*

7. What must Louis do immediately after Prior tells him he has the AIDS virus? *He must bury his grandmother.*

8. What does Harper think of Washington DC? *She thinks it's a giant cemetery (huge white graves and mausoleums everywhere)*

9. With what secret does Harper taunt Joe? *Whether or not she is pregnant.*

10. Near the end of Act One, what does Louis ask of Prior? *“Please get better. Please. Please don't get any sicker.”*

11. Henry diagnoses Roy as having AIDS. What is Roy's reaction? *He denies it, saying, “AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer.”*

12. Where do Joe and Louis first meet and what is Louis doing at the time? *Louis is crying in the bathroom where they first meet.*

13. What does Prior disclose to Harper when they meet in their simultaneous hallucinating/dream scene? *Her husband Joe is homosexual.*

14. What does Roy make Martin Heller do to prove he is loyal to him? *Rub his back.*

15. Who does Joe drunkenly telephone from a pay phone in the middle of the night? *His mother, Hannah, in Utah*

16. What is the name of Belize’s favorite paperback novel? *In Love with the Night Mysterious*

17. Why book does Belize suggest Louis put down in order to read the abovementioned novel? *Democracy in America*

18. Once in Antarctica, what character does Harper conjure up to keep her from being lonely? *An Eskimo*

19. At the end of the play, who accompanies Louis to his home? *Joe*

20. Who is the final person to appear to Prior, and what is his/ her message? *The Angel appears, saying, “Greetings, Prophet; The Great Work begins: The Messenger has arrived.”*
C. Study Questions

1. Joe has denied his identity as a homosexual for a very long time. As a married Mormon, he outwardly leads a life that others, including his mother, can approve of. However, towards the end of the play Joe makes a decision to follow Louis to his home. What discovery does Joe make that leads him to take this action?

2. In Act One, the conflict between the play’s central characters (Joe and Harper, Louis and Prior) begins to unfold. These conflicts will remain throughout the entire play. What are Harper and Joe’s conflicts? What are Louis and Prior’s conflicts? In what ways do these relationships resemble each other, and how does this match with what you may have assumed before reading or watching the play?

3. There is a societal expectation that couples should support one another through difficult times. In the play, Louis and Prior experience a crisis when Prior learns, and then must tell Louis, that he is HIV positive. What do you think about the way Louis reacts to this news?

4. In the play we learn that Harper, Joe’s wife, is addicted to Valium and also has fears of leaving her home (agoraphobia). Discuss the circumstances surrounding Harper’s addictions and fears. What might have given rise to them? How might these problems be alleviated, and how does this relate to Harper’s action and throughline (what she wants to attain or achieve)?

5. In Act Two, Scene Seven, there is a powerful dialogue between Louis and Joe about the true meaning of freedom. Louis alleges that the idea of “the land of the free and the home of the brave” is irresponsible because it encourages a lack of obligation to anything or anyone. It is suggested that the American ideal of freedom is actually terrifying, heartless and greedy. Consider the context of Louis’ statements (i.e., what his character is going through). Do you agree with him? What is your definition of freedom? Do you think America lives up to its own standards?
D. Further Reading/ Bibliography


