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Where Angels Fear to Tread

City Lights continues its ambitious two-part production of 'Angels in America'.

By Marianne Messina

PICKING UP where *Angels in America, Part I* left off last year, City Lights Theater's ambitious *Angels in America, Part II: Perestroika* comes roaring in on an apocalyptic set (Ron Gasparinetti) of strategically arranged debris. Only a recognizable hospital bed and IV bottle mar the chaos. It may help to know that *Part I* caused this destruction with the cataclysmic visitation of an angel. But you don't need to have seen *Part I* to take in *Part II*; the experience is cryptic either way and delivered on a communicable rash of over-the-top Hellgate language from playwright Tony Kushner: "Tell that to my lesions."

Falling between grit and hyperbole, the patchwork of stories forefronts the deterioration and sputtering, AIDS-related death of foul-mouthed, former McCarthyist lawyer Roy Cohn. As Cohn, coughing up bilious insults on anyone within range, actor Kevin Kirby deserves plaudits—he is unremitting as the source of spew. Cohn's favorite victim is his black, fairy nurse mother (a bleached blond and fabulous Lance Gardner). The rest of the relationship relay goes something like this: Unable to face his lover's AIDS, Louis (Jason Arias) has left Prior (Tomas Theriot) and found Joe (Jeff Clarke), who (unable to face his gayness) has left Harper (Julianne Arnall). The actors have achieved miraculous command of the speeches, but acting prowess can't replace what Kushner really needs, an editor with a merciless scalpel.

In addition to Harper and Prior's visionary dreams, Cohn has visitations from the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg (Shareen Merriam), whom he prosecuted to death penalty. The scenes between Cohn and the vengeful Rosenberg ("Fucking succubus!" he spits) are some of the funniest, as is any scene with Gardner, the nurse who crosses fab fun with weary compassion. But the play makes sure we don't surfeit on comedic moments, interrupting them with tragic relief, such as wracking, disease-signaling coughs.

In keeping with the surreal, director Kit Wilder nicely blurs spatial and temporal lines. In zones that freeze one scene and activate another, jilted lovers from a suspended scene might react to their former lover's candidness in a spotlighted scene. The babble occasionally upchucks a stray nugget of insight. The Angel (Gemma Beddo Barozzi looking all Vanna White) stutters "I-I-I" on every entrance, and as Louis tries, guiltily, to reconnect with his former lover Prior, he picks up the refrain, "I-I-I ...," suggesting characters swimming in a sea of ego or Greek hubris or original sin. An occasional line approaches poetry, but most fall off full of sound and fury and *Perestroika* remains more artistic than substantial.

Both the drama and language have a vaudevillian way of encoring big finishes along the idea that one good ending deserves a bigger one. Cohn even pops up for a second death speech, which helped trick this opening night audience into three or four false starts on the final applause. Yes, you want to say, "Die already." Maybe *Perestroika* means to jokingly mimic life in its stubbornness, rebirth after rebirth—a phenomenon examined throughout the show. That's a generous analysis. The best bet is to stage this as a mayhem videogame and keep deracinated tongue in cheek.

ANGELS IN AMERICA: PART II: PERESTROIKA, a City Lights production, plays Thursday–Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2 or 7pm through Oct. 21 at City Lights, 529 S. Second St., San Jose. Tickets are \$25–\$40. (408.295.4200)



Photograph by Kit Wilder
VISITATION: Gemma Beddo Barozzi swoops in on the action with Tomas Theriot in 'Angels in America, Part II.'