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City Lights evolves as "Angels" concludes

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Mercury News



GEMMA BEDDO BAROZZI as *The Angel*
Photo by: Kit Wilder

The great work begins! The messenger has arrived!

Only she may not be quite as you remember her. In past incarnations of "Angels in America," the heavenly title character has often been a strangely ethereal creature, winged, asexual and bald.

Not at City Lights Theater Company. Here the Angel has been reincarnated as a bodacious blond sex kitten draped in silver-lame and dripping old-school Hollywood glam. It's one of the many visionary reinventions of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning epic in this extremely gratifying production of "Perestroika."

City Lights staged the first half of the two-part drama last fall. Now, after leaving the audience cliff-hanging for a year, director Kit Wilder has reunited the cast for the long-awaited final installment of the greatest play of its generation.

The revelation of the production is how far the company has come since Part One. If there was a hint of tentativeness last time, now the ensemble has drilled all the way down to the core. All the performances cut deeper than before and the fact that the cast has evolved in front of our eyes adds to the sense of catharsis. City Lights soars on the wings of "Angels," kicking off its 25th anniversary season by bringing the landmark to San Jose.

The aforementioned angel (Gemma Beddo Barozzi) doesn't fly in this production but she is omnipresent, perched high above the action, ever-watchful as the mortals below struggle to make peace with the forces of change ripping through Manhattan in the '80s. Kushner uncovers the price of change, the way it ruptures hearts and lives and civilizations. Wilder cleverly exposes the inter-connectedness of all things by overlapping the scenes so that the soap-operatic plot lines blur and pop together.

Meet Louis (Jason Arias), a sensitive intellectual fellow who has nevertheless dumped his lover (Prior) because he couldn't stand the horror of living with AIDS. So he takes up with Joe (Jeff Clarke), a closeted, gay Republican Mormon, but then he can't stand to live with himself.

Meanwhile, Joe's wife, Harper (Julianne Arnall), a sex-starved pill-popping house body, senses the end is near. She can feel the holes in the ozones widening over head, but she can barely muster the courage to leave the apartment.

Prior (a beyond-fierce Tomas Theriot) has little choice in the matter. Watching disease ravage his body, he lies in bed, captive to his visions of the Angel, who crashes through the ceiling on gossamer wings and sends the whole world spinning.

The apocalyptic tenor of the play, Kushner's prophetic warnings about planetary collapse, hits home with far more ferocity now than it did when the play premiered in San Francisco in 1991. Ron Gasparinetti's rubble-strewn set (chunks of plaster and concrete double as furniture) suggests the destruction to come.

But none of the characters here bow their heads in the face of doom. Prior wrestles with his mortality. Harper faces being alone. Belize (a pitch-perfect Lance Gardner) the smart-mouthed drag queen, even

forgives Roy Cohn (Kevin Kirby), a bile-spewing former McCarthyite who made a career out of persecuting the weak. Each of them presses on.

"In this world, there's a kind of painful progress," notes Harper, "longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead."

The magic of language and ideas take center stage in this bravely minimalist revival, which proves the play doesn't need special effects to dazzle its audience. It also proves that City Lights is seriously committed to pushing the South Bay theater scene forward.

Heaven may be a city much like San Francisco, as the playwright puts it, but the big news is "Angels" has finally landed in San Jose.

'Angels in America - Part Two: Perestroika'

By Tony Kushner

The upshot: City Lights soars on the wings of "Angels in America," launching its 25th anniversary season by bringing the greatest play of its generation to San Jose.

Where: City Lights Theater Company, 529 S. Second St., San Jose

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Oct. 21

Running time: Just under three hours, one intermission)

Tickets: \$25-\$40 (student and senior discounts available); (408) 295-4200, www.cltc.org

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