

## Rising to heights of 'Angels'

By Karen D'Souza

Mercury News

When "Angels in America" first took wing on stage -- in San Francisco in 1991 -- it blew the lid right off the American theater. History gets cracked wide open in this sprawling marathon. Hearts are broken, ideologies laid bare, expectations blown away. The Pulitzer- and Tony-winning piece instantly established its writer, Tony Kushner, as a theatrical genius. Some say he's the Shaw of his generation.

In "Angels" he looks back on the zeitgeist of the '80s, the years of Reaganomics and AIDS, fear and greed, environmental collapse and religious zealotry. Part soap opera, part political debate, all epic, "Angels" is arguably the finest American play of our age. It's certainly one of the biggest plays of our time, and now the gutsy little City Lights Theater Company has taken upon itself to bring it to San Jose -- a move that brings the troupe to a whole new level of ambition and artistry. Part one of this opus, subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Millennium Approaches," will run through Oct. 15. Part two, "Perestroika," is under consideration for a future season.

The sheer scope of part one sometimes exceeds the company's grasp. Still, directors Kit Wilder and Lisa Mallette definitely have delivered the most audacious project in the theater's history. The cast of eight morphs through almost 20 roles with nuance and truth. The beyond-witty dialogue crackles with Kushner's stimulating intellect and, most significantly, the play moves us deeply. Louis (Jason Arias), an underemployed Manhattan intellectual, doesn't believe in angels, but he does believe in ideas. He believes that dialectics will set us free. But when his partner Prior (Tomas Theriot) is diagnosed with AIDS, Louis can't take the strain. He chooses self-preservation over loyalty and winds up flirting madly with right-wing Mormon law clerk Joe Pitt (Jeff Clarke), who happens to flirt back.

Well, now. Joe's pill-popping, denial-happy wife Harper (Julianne Arnall) can't quite believe it. As she puts it, in her church, they don't believe in homosexuals. To which Prior retorts, in his church they don't believe in Mormons.

And did we mention the Mac Daddy-dressing cosmic travel agent named Mr. Lies? Like all the other characters here, he lives in the shadow of Roy Cohn (Kevin Kirby), the power-hungry politico who desperately insists that his clout in Washington will keep him from falling prey to AIDS.

The directors realize this massive vision on a simple set (by Ron Gasparinetti) of crumbling columns and cracked marble. The angel may not actually fly in this staging, but the themes sure do. Unfussy costumes, props and sound effects prove that the only pyrotechnics this play demands are in its explosive ideas and powerful language.

There are moments when Kirby could strike deeper into the black heart of his venomous character, and Arias misses the sexiness of Louis' political rants, but for the most part, the City Lights ensemble does some of its finest work, leaping from one character to another with great dexterity.

Theriot nails Prior's fabulous deadpan asides. Arnall transforms from the dreamy Harper into a swaggering right-wing honcho. Lance Gardner turns eye rolling into a high art as the sassy Belize and gets his bling on big time as Mr. Lies.

The only disappointing thing about this "Angels" is that must we fall back to Earth when it ends. While the three-hour "Millennium" certainly stands on its own as a play unto itself, yours truly will be waiting with bated breath for this troupe to take on part two.

'Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (part one: Millennium Approaches)' By Tony Kushner

**The upshot** A very brave small theater makes its mark with one of the biggest plays of our time.

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

**When** 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

**Through** Oct. 15

**Running time** Just over three hours, with two intermissions

**Tickets** \$20-\$35 (student and senior discounts available)

**Call** (408) 295-4200, or see [www.cltc.org](http://www.cltc.org)

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