

ANGELS IN AMERICA

MILLENNIUM APPROACHES

A PLAY BY TONY KUSHNER



EDUCATION PACK

A FOOLS & KINGS PRODUCTION AT THE
OXFORD PLAYHOUSE
23/01/2012 - 26/01/2013

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OXFORD
PLAYHOUSE



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About the show

Angels in America - a contemporary masterpiece written by celebrated American playwright Tony Kushner - will be performed at the Oxford Playhouse between January 23rd - 26th. This Pulitzer Prize winning Drama, revered as 'one of the most important pieces of theatre to come out of the late 20th century' explores the political, religious and social issues affecting the lives of those living at the height of the AIDS Crisis in New York City and elsewhere.

Produced and performed to a professional standard by Oxford University students, *Angels in America* offers a unique educational experience to students of a number of disciplines.

Education and Access on offer

With the support of our extensive education program, we aim to enrich students' understanding of both the production and the issues it explores.

For those students studying English and Theatre Studies, this performance offers an opportunity to examine the presentation of political issues through theatre; indeed, following in the footsteps of Miller, Churchill, Stoppard and Beckett, Kushner is one of the few dramatists who successfully manages to combine social resonance with theatrical excellence. For History and Politics students, *Angels in America* provides an engaging insight to the consequences of McCarthyism, through the downfall of Roy Cohn.

We are offering a range of free talks, including one with three Oxford tutors with extensive knowledge of 20th Century literature and Modern Drama, and a second with Jonathan Grimshaw, one of the most prominent HIV/AIDS activists. A post-production discussion with cast and crew is also available, allowing students to examine the artistic development behind the production, and the practicalities of putting on a show of this size. To augment this, our director, producers and cast are offering additional workshops to interested school groups.

To allow students to gain a fuller picture of life at Oxford, we are also hosting an admissions/access event at Keble College before our Thursday matinee, including tours by current students, and a discussion with a senior admissions tutor at Oxford. This will include lunch in Keble's historic dining hall.

I have included information on all of these opportunities in the pack, but for more information, please feel free to contact us at: angelsinoxford@gmail.com.

The Play

Production History

Angels in America first sprung from the mad, adventurous mind of Tony Kushner in 1987: within a few years, it had won him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, several Tony Awards, a Drama Desk Award, a New York Critics Circle Award and an overwhelmingly positive critical and commercial reception. the *New York Times* called it a “searing and radical rethinking” of American political drama, as well as “the most extravagant and moving demonstration imaginable” of the artistic response to AIDS. The original Chicago production garnered two New York productions (most recently 2010), and lead to a multiple Golden Globe and Emmy award winning screen adaptation starring Meryl Streep, Al Pacino and Emma Thompson.

Plot Summary

Angels in America focuses on the stories of two troubled couples, one gay, one straight: “word processor” Louis Ironson and his lover Prior Walter, and Mormon lawyer Joe Pitt and his wife Harper. After the funeral of Louis's grandmother, Prior tells him that he has contracted AIDS, and Louis panics. He tries to care for Prior but soon realizes he cannot stand the strain and uncertainty. Meanwhile, Joe is offered a job in the Justice Department by Roy Cohn, his right-wing, bigoted mentor and friend. But Harper, who is addicted to Valium and suffers anxiety and hallucinations, does not want to move to Washington.

The two couples' fates quickly intertwine: Joe stumbles upon Louis crying in the bathroom of the courthouse where he works, and they strike up an unlikely friendship based in part on Louis's suspicion that Joe is gay. Harper and Prior also meet, in a fantastical mutual dream sequence in which Prior, operating on the “threshold of revelation,” reveals to Harper that her husband is a closeted homosexual. Harper confronts Joe, who denies it but says he has struggled inwardly with the issue. Roy receives a different kind of surprise: At an appointment with his doctor Henry, he learns that he too has been diagnosed with AIDS. But Roy, who considers gay men weak and ineffectual, thunders that he has nothing in common with them—AIDS is a disease of homosexuals, whereas he has “liver cancer.” Henry, disgusted, urges him to use his clout to obtain an experimental AIDS drug.

Prior's illness and Harper's terrors both grow worse. Louis strays from Prior's bedside to seek anonymous sex in Central Park at night. Fortunately, Prior has a more reliable caretaker in Belize, an ex-drag queen and dear friend. Prior confesses to Belize that he has been hearing a wonderful and mysterious voice; Belize is skeptical, but once he leaves we hear the voice speak to Prior, telling him she is a messenger who will soon arrive for him. As the days pass, Louis and Joe grow closer and the sexual tinge in their banter grows more and more obvious. Finally, Joe drunkenly telephones his mother Hannah in Salt Lake City to tell her that he is a homosexual, but Hannah tells him he is being ridiculous. Nonetheless, she makes plans to sell her house and come to New York to put things right. In a tense and climactic scene, Joe tells Harper about his feelings, and she screams at him to leave, while Louis tells Prior he is moving out.

The disconsolate Prior is awakened one night by the ghosts of two ancestors who tell him they have come to prepare the way for the unseen messenger. Tormented by supernatural appearances and by his anguish over Louis, Prior becomes increasingly desperate. Joe, distraught in his own way, tells Roy he cannot accept his offer; Roy explodes at him and calls him a “sissy.” He then tells Joe about his greatest achievement, illegally intervening in the espionage trial of Ethel Rosenberg in the 1950s and guaranteeing her execution. Joe is shocked by Roy's lack of ethics. When Joe leaves, the ghost of Ethel appears, to witness Roy's last days on earth. As *Millenium Approaches* concludes, Joe follows Louis to the park, then takes him home for sex, while Prior's prophetic visions culminate in the appearance of an imposing, beautiful angel who crashes through the his roof proclaiming, “The Great Work begins.”

Events

Talks

Wednesday 23rd January, 4:30pm:

Jonathan Grimshaw on the AIDS pandemic



Held in Magdalen College's Grove auditorium, we will be hosting a talk and Q&A session with Jonathan Grimshaw on the AIDS pandemic. As one of the first diagnosed sufferers of HIV in Britain, he will speak on his personal experiences of the disease, its public perception, and its future.

Jonathan is one of the most prominent HIV+ individuals in the UK today, having set up one of the earliest support groups for those with HIV: Body Positive. His early counseling work culminated in the founding of the Landmark AIDS centre in 1989, which was opened by Princess Diana. Jonathan has since been extremely active in challenging the public stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS - he sat on the first committee responsible for planning the first public health campaigns against the virus, including the stark 'Don't Die of Ignorance' television campaigns. Given his huge achievements and unique experiences, this promises to be a very enlightening discussion.

Thursday 24th January, 1:30pm:

Gay/AIDS Writing & Modern Drama

Before our Thursday matinee, we will be holding a short lecture on AIDS & homosexuality in Modern Drama by three of Oxford University's most prominent English Literature scholars. This will be held in the Oxford Playhouse Top Room.

Dr. Sos Eltis is a Fellow and Tutor in English of Brasenose College. She is the author of *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the plays of Oscar Wilde* (1996), which has been described as "a radical re-examination of the plays of Oscar Wilde". Eltis is a Nineteenth and Twentieth century specialist, with a particular interest in theatre.



Dr. James Methven is the former Dean of Oriel College and English Faculty lecturer, who specializes in Modern Drama and Victorian literature. He has written extensively on these topics, participated in countless theatre performances, and most recently published *Precious Assets* (2009) - a modern reinterpretation of a number of Catullus poems. He is presently teaching English at Magdalen College School.

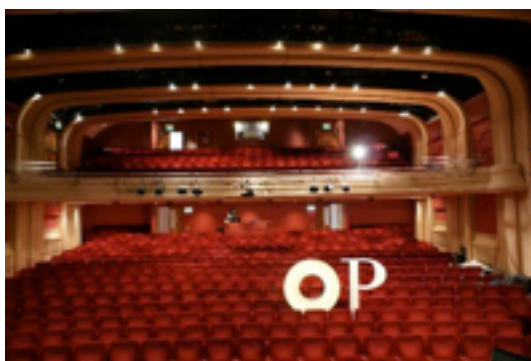


Dr. Andrew Blades is a Lecturer in English at St. Peters College. His research focuses primarily on 20th Century American Literature pertaining to the AIDS Epidemic, and he is currently writing a book provisionally entitled *Reassessing American AIDS Literature*. He also writes theatre reviews for The Stage.



Friday 24th January, 11pm:

Angels in Oxford - Bringing the play to life



Held after the show in the Playhouse main auditorium, the director, designer and producers will be holding a question and answer session with students to allow them to discover the process of producing plays in Oxford. This will be of particular interest to Theatre students, as we hope to offer rare insight into semi-professional student drama, and exactly what that entails. We hope to show that it is entirely possible to pursue a theatrical career whilst at Oxford.

Workshops

We are offering a number of free workshops, at a time of your choosing, for schools that are booked to attend the production led by our director and producers. These can take a number of formats, depending on your requirements, and we aim to tailor the workshop to engage your students with theatre on all levels. Options include:

1. Script-based work: to discover how Kushner's writing can be interpreted, and presented on stage to fulfill an artistic vision. We would encourage students to perform a scene from the play, based on their interpretations of the text, which would be discussed at the end of the session.
2. Directing workshops: exploring the processes required to direct a play including guidance on the creative decisions involved, as well as the obstacles students may face.
3. Production role-plays: students are assigned a role in the production team, and guided through the stages of technical theatre and set design.

Admissions

Before our Thursday matinee (from 12:30pm on the 24th January), we are holding an admissions workshop at Keble College, including a tour and an admissions talk led by Keble's senior admissions officer: Ms. Boriana Boneva. Additionally we're offering cooked lunch in Keble's beautiful dining hall (the latter at a maximum price of £4.50 per pupil).

The tour of Keble will be led by current Oxford university students and Ms. Boneva, and will include a visit to the chapel, extensive grounds and theatre, as well as undergraduate accommodation, so students will receive a comprehensive picture of the Oxford University experience. It is also an ideal time for students to ask us questions in a less formal environment, which can usefully inform the admissions process, and their decision to apply.

This will be followed by the admissions talk, which will cover the process of application, tips on what to include in a personal statement and what to expect from interviews. Students can then ask further questions, both during a Q&A at the end of the talk, and during lunch.



Subjects and syllabus relevance

Theatre Studies

Theatre students will find this play to be a tremendous educational and artistic opportunity. Apart from experiencing a production of the highest quality, drama students will be able to take part in our drama workshops and our post-show discussion with the cast and crew. This will offer a first hand perspective of theatre production at a university and semi-professional level, and will allow them to explore the different aspects of production, from performance to design.

Angels in America is viewed as a core script in the modern theatrical canon. Newsweek referred to it as ‘The broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time’, and its relevance to other contemporary works is undeniable. The play’s genesis can be likened to that of *Beirut* (1988) and *The Normal Heart* (1986), whilst its influence is felt throughout *The Laramie Project* (2000), *Ruined* (2009) and *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994). Most recently Harrison David Rivers spoke of *Angels’* influence upon his work *When Last We Flew* (2010), having been influenced as a fifteen year old reader to consider the relationship between theatre and personal growth.

Drama and Theatre Studies	
GCSE EDEXCEL UNIT 2 AOS 3 AQA UNIT 1 A-LEVEL EDEXCEL UNITS 1, 2, 3 AQA UNIT 1	Response to Live Performance: By watching the production, students can gain inspiration for their own performance (Edexcel GCSE), or use the play as a piece to write on in the exam (AQA). That students have the opportunity to ask questions to not only the director, but other members of the creative team and actors, means they can engage more thoroughly in writing about the performance, direction and design.
GCSE EDEXCEL UNIT 1 AQA UNIT 2 A-LEVEL EDEXCEL UNITS 2 & 3 AQA UNITS 2 & 4	Performance: The directing and performance workshops provide inspiration and encouragement for students to develop their performance skills for their practical assessments. The opportunity to develop technical skills, such as directing, producing or lighting, offers more potential for students to explore the variety of assessment objectives within the curriculum.

English Literature

Whilst not a set text, *Angels in America* is a canonical piece of American Literature, that not only deserves attention in its own right, but also serves to enhance responses to other contemporary texts. Harold Bloom’s inclusion of the play in *The Western Canon* (1994) is emblematic of its timeless relevance. Students may be interested to consider the relationship between Kushner’s work and the ‘90s In-Yer-Face movement in British theatre, which often chose to deal with similar issues very differently. Our academic panel discussion and workshops may be of particular interest.

English Literature	
A-LEVEL AQA COURSE B UNIT 4 OCR UNIT F662 and F664	Further and Independent Reading: Students may use this text as part of their independent reading. Not only is it a landmark piece of 20th Century theatre (OCR F662), but it would provide an extremely interesting piece to analyse from the perspective of a Marxist or Feminist school (Section 1, AQA).

History

Angels in America is a key text in examining the past and its effect on the modern world. Set in America in 1985, at the height of the AIDS crisis, this play examines one of the greatest tragedies in recent history, along with its wider political, social and religious implications.

In terms of political history, the AIDS pandemic polarised governmental policy. Major politicians of the age are now to be forever remembered in the light of their response to the crisis, most notably Reagan and Thatcher. Elsewhere artists, writers and historians have likened the AIDS pandemic to such past outbreaks as Bubonic Plague, Typhoid and Polio, as well as more recent eruptions of Avian Flu. History students would benefit in examining this play with relation to the various responses to pandemics throughout history.

At our lecture and discussion with Jonathan Grimshaw, students will have a chance to discuss his first hand experience with the disease and the unfolding history of HIV internationally.

History	
GCSE AQA UNIT 1A	Studies in Development: <i>Angels in America</i> offers an extremely engaging perspective to the AIDS crises, one of the biggest issues in modern society, politics and medicine. Our second pre-show talk with Jonathan Grimshaw gives students access to a first-hand experience of the evolving approach to public health by governments and institutions.
A-LEVEL ALL: UNIT 4	Historical Significance: The play covers communism and the personal downfall of Roy Cohn (OCR Course B), as well as the AIDS epidemic - a topic that spans from its emergence in the 1910s to the present day, homophobia and religious fanaticism.

PSHCE

David Cameron's World AIDS Day message this year urged the public to 'take action and reflect', before observing that up to one quarter of HIV sufferers in the UK are unaware that they have contracted the disease. It is well recognised that HIV/AIDS is not a solved issue. Remarkable scientific advancements have certainly lessened the visible impact of the illness on the Western world, yet has simultaneously given rise to complacency and ignorance. The challenges the virus presents to society have changed, not vanished, and it is incredibly important that the students of today are raised with a knowledge of the most destructive, prevalent STD of the last century.

Angels in America presents a unique opportunity to gain some awareness of the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS - a phenomenon so far removed from many of us as to be irrelevant - through one of the greatest tales of the 20th Century.

Ticket Information

Angels in America will be performed at the Oxford Playhouse, on Beaumont Street, Oxford (OX1 2LW) at the following times:

January 23rd - 7:30pm
January 24th - 2:30pm and 7:30pm
January 25th - 8:00pm
January 26th - 2:30pm and 7:30pm

Tickets can be purchased at the discounted rate of **£9.50 per pupil** for school groups of 10 or more.

One free ticket will be granted to the accompanying teacher for groups of 15 or more.

For group bookings, call the Oxford Playhouse ticket office on:

01865 305 305

Whilst discount bookings are not available online, our standard-price tickets (£10/12/15) can be booked here:

<http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com/show/?eventid=2884>

The remainder of our talks and events are free to ticket holders, although lunch at Keble is a maximum additional cost of **£4.50**. Both may be booked by contacting our education officer at:

angelsinoxford@gmail.com



10% of all profits will be donated to the National AIDS Trust.

We aim to provide an individual education package for every school, so please do get in touch with your specific requirements! Equally, don't hesitate to contact us at any time for additional information using the email address above.

We sincerely hope to hear from you soon.

www.angelsinoxford.com

angelsinoxford@gmail.com

@AngelsinOxford

07748348823 (Simon Devenport, Co-Producer)

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