

**Stefano Asperti, “Angels Have Landed: American Identity in the New Millennium in the HBO production of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*” (estratti)**

[... T]he play was first staged a short time after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union while the TV version was filmed and televised a couple years after 9/11.

[...]

Since it opened on Broadway in 1991, Kushner’s *Angels in America* has been almost instantly canonized and has come to be considered nothing less than a cultural phenomenon. In John M. Clum’s words it is «the most talked about, written about and awarded, play of the last decade, [...] a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture»<sup>1</sup> and, according to Nancy Franklin,

[t]here is wide agreement, and no compelling counterargument, that Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* is the most important play of the last decade. A fearless, ambitious work, it took in, and took on, the Reagan years (it is set in 1985 and 1986), American history, the aids plague, sexuality, love, death, religion, and the meaning of community [...].<sup>2</sup>

Similarly the 2003 HBO production of Tony Kushner’s two-part epic *Angels in America* was almost unanimously viewed by critics as a triumphant adaptation of a stage play for television. According to Matthew Gilbert, «Nichols has managed to make *Angels in America* thrive onscreen, without compromising its intellectual integrity, its timeless anxiety for America’s minorities, its heart. Along with Kushner, he has given the movie what Prior is so passionately committed to: “More life”».<sup>3</sup>

[...]

Gilbert writes that television nurtures the paradoxical phenomenon of making *Angels* both «intimate and epic at the same time,» thus allowing viewers to find drama in the small details discernible through facial close-ups, as well as the play’s «Big Themes». The film’s opening credits seem to suggest that the production is intent on explaining such “Big Themes.”

***[Vedere il video della sigla iniziale]***

The “Big Themes” referred to by Gilbert include meditations on race, sexuality, religion, AIDS, and the American political landscape of the Reagan-Bush administrations.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 313, 324.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Franklin, “America, Lost and Found”, *The New Yorker*, 8 December 2003, <[www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/12/08/031208crte\\_television](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/12/08/031208crte_television)>, viewed 28 September 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Gilbert, “Angels in America” (review), *Boston Globe*, 5 December 2003.

[...]

In the two parts of *Angels in America*, Kushner attempts to address the history of Western civilization in general and the development of the United States as a nation in particular by placing his characters within the context of world history. Yet the HBO adaptation divests the characters of many of these historical and cultural references.

[...]

Kushner's play has a specifically American focus, as demonstrated by inclusion of the country's name in the title, which points to the national character of this epic. The setting, the characters, the political concerns, and even the emphasis on New York, Mormonism, McCarthyism and racial tensions make this a play that is firmly tied to its US context. However, the HBO film, while necessarily preserving the bulk of the American subject matter, also cuts some of the subtler commentary on US history and politics.

Both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* begin with scenes and characters that seek to frame action and theme in historical context. [...] In the former scene [...] an old rabbi speaks at the funeral of Sarah Ironson, Louis's grandmother, praising her as one of those Russian Jewish immigrants who bridged both the Old and New Worlds at the turn of the century and sought to preserve the old traditions.

***[Vedere il video del discorso del rabbino all'inizio della prima puntata]***

Nichols wisely retains the dialogue that helps transform Sarah Ironson from a mere person to a kind of archetype of the immigrant experience and also cuts away from the rabbi and the funeral service to newsreel footage and archival photographs that document the immigrant experience. These visuals underscore the physical journey she made and confirm the rabbi's assertion that those in the present, although spiritually and historically connected to her and her ilk, may only replicate such a journey in the metaphorical sense. However, two small but crucial portions of the rabbi's monologue fail to make it to the screen. The first is his description of the deceased as «the last of the Mohicans». It is a funny line, but such a statement also connects the Jewish immigrant experience to the story of Native Americans, while acknowledging the darker side of the American dream. The joke, then, resonates with America's complex past, that melds both the myth and reality of American notions of racism and xenophobia. The second cut from the rabbi's speech is far more puzzling, since it explicates a core thematic image in *Angels in America*. The rabbi tells the assembled mourners that Sarah Ironson struggled and fought «for the Jewish family, for the Jewish home.» In the film, though, he does not go on to include what the original text gives as the purpose behind this struggle: «so that you would not grow up here, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted». This brilliant, ironic inversion of the credo of the American immigrant

experience seems not only to contain the major argument of the rabbi's speech, but it also begins one of Kushner's major preoccupations throughout the play. Indeed, this image represents the first statement of a central theme, namely that the myth and reality of "America" are two different, often contradictory, entities. Kushner's major characters prove the wisdom of the rabbi's remark and elevate it to a poetic truth; Mormons, Jews, blacks, gays-minorities all-throughout the play either resist or are prevented from blending into the fabric of mainstream America.

[...]

In an article celebrating the play's transference to film, critic Alisa Solomon recalls the importance of Kushner's achievement at the time of the premiere of *Angels in America*: «Not only did he take on "national themes," as his subtitle reminds us, but he queered the debate on them in a "gay fantasia"». Since then much has been written about this phenomenon. David Savran, for example, asserts that Kushner's contribution possesses both literary and political ramifications that go well beyond the act of foregrounding explicitly gay men in a piece of dramatic literature:

More decisively than any other recent cultural text, *Angels* queers the America of Joseph Smith – and Ronald Reagan – by placing this oppressed class [i.e., homosexuals] at the very center of American history, by showing it to be not just the depository of a special kind of knowledge but by recognizing the central role that it has had in the construction of a national subject, policy, literature, and theater. On this subject the play is not ambivalent at all.<sup>4</sup>

Viewed through this lens, it is no coincidence that Kushner's angel anoints Prior, a gay man suffering from AIDS, as the prophet who will ostensibly lead America into the new millennium.

[... T]he TV adaptation of *Angels in America* [partially] proceeds to a "de-queering" of the text, which is evident from the very beginning, i.e. in the opening credits, where the original subtitle of the play, "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," has been eloquently omitted.

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<sup>4</sup> David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation", in Geis, Deborah R.; Kruger, Steven F., *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on 'Angels in America'*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 36.