Angels Redux

Is a revival of the 1993 play dated or much overdue?

August 10, 2010 By Bob Ickes

In *Next Fall*, one of the nominees for Best Play at the 64th annual Tony Awards this past June, a gay couple explore the meaning of life as one of them lies dying—and he isn't dying of AIDS. After years of Broadway and off-Broadway AIDS plots, *Next Fall* has instead dared to maim a gay man with a car accident.

Should gay men rejoice that they are being depicted as perishing from something other than AIDS? Or should we all worry that the theater—the medium that seemed most hospitable to portraying the epidemic over the years—seems to be abandoning the fight? Is this an indication that Broadway, like the rest of America, is under the incorrect impression that the HIV pandemic is under control—or worse, over?

On September 14, an ideal forum for addressing these issues returns to the New York stage, albeit off-Broadway. Through December 19, The Signature Theatre Company will mount the first significant revival of the most momentous HIV-related drama of them all, Tony Kushner's Tony Award– and Pulitzer Prize–winning *Angels in America: A National Fantasia on Gay Themes*.

Part one of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, debuted on Broadway in May 1993; part two, Perestroika, joined it in repertory that November. In 2003, Mike Nichols directed a superlative version for HBO starring Meryl Streep, Al Pacino and Emma Thompson.

Two questions for today's audiences are: Will the combined revival, with its mentions of AZT and other outdated treatments, seem behind the times? Similarly, will it serve as a critical reminder that HIV is alive and well—and still killing people?

The answer to the first question, it seems fair to suggest, is no. The play may be returning when we need it most. It is entirely relevant, in 2010, to view the socially diverse cast of characters—ingeniously assigned, in multiple roles, to a cast of eight—as those who could potentially contract the virus.

Today, we can wonder, as perhaps many of us didn't before: Should the Valium-addled wife of the play's closeted Mormon attorney be tested for HIV? How about the African-American male nurse, who is spattered with blood after an HIV-positive man rips out his IV? (Today, the nurse would

likely take PEP—post-exposure prophylaxis—to avoid transmission.)

We now know, as many people in 1993 mainstream America did not (or refused to believe), that the virus has long been affecting communities of color and heterosexual men and women. Our hope is that this *Angels* revival will find new resonance today, reminding audiences that the curtain has, sadly, yet to fall on the final act of AIDS.

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