

Angels in America

Graeme Cope review

Review of Heidelberg Theatre Company's
Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches
for Curtain Up- Sundays at One on 3CR 855AM.

(Performance: Thursday, 10 July 2008)

I suppose most thespians know what Tony Kushner's Angels in America is about but for anyone who doesn't: the plot deals – both realistically and fantasmagorically – with the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in America against a background of increasing social conservatism represented by the Reagan administration. There are two separate but counterpointed and ultimately interlinked stories. On the one hand, we have the troubled tale of Prior, Louis and their openly gay friends; on the other, the contortions of the closeted attorney Roy Cohn and his equally closeted married protégé Joe.

Champion curmudgeon that I am, I'll take some convincing that this overwrought, overwritten, overlong and perhaps now even outdated extravaganza is the "masterpiece of the American theatre" director Bruce Akers' program note reckons. But that's in the bye and bye because I basically enjoyed the production as a production – and that's what a review's supposed to be about, isn't it?

On the second night performance I saw Angels, the players' attack wasn't perhaps as full-blooded and all-guns-blazing as it might have been. The momentum, especially towards the end - this is a three-hour, two-interval escapade – seemed to flag a little and the peaks and valleys both within and between some of the many scenes became just undulating territory populated by characters sometimes saying lines without quite enough of the feeling that gives meaning. And, yes, I know the gender-neutral casting of the minor characters is according to the script but it needed a bit more refinement. Accents, too, sometimes blurred clarity, particularly among the doubled characters. Scene changes tended to the flaccid and a goodly ration of the humour of the piece (and there's quite a bit of it, despite the theme) often seemed to have slipped below the radar.

Yet don't get me wrong because, reservations aside, the core of the production's adamant solid. And that's because of the strength, commitment and

intensity of its six not inconsiderably experienced principals: Tim Constantine, Justin Stevens and Peter Tedford on the one (liberal) side; Paul Kennedy, Angelo De Cata and Rhiannon Leach on the (conservative) other. A powerful and persuasive sextet that had the ability to breathe life into characters that are, in varying degrees, essentially just skeletal representations of ideological positions. And how often do we see "names" such as Juliet Hayday and Kate Bowers content to do the walk-ons!

Requiring, as it does, many locations and, more ingeniously, walls to part to allow for a heavenly presence in its last few moments, Angels represents quite a challenge to its designer. George Tranter's setting was one of those that looked simple but clearly would not have been the easiest to build and finish, so I'll pay tribute to scenic artist Leanne Cole and Denis Pain and his construction team as well as to the creative imagination behind them.

Jason Bovaird's lighting's nothing short of splendid: some of the best I've seen in a long time in the straight theatre. Clearly delineating the five main acting areas and giving each a mood appropriate to its place in the action (bedroom, hospital ward, park, office, mind-space and so on), the lights hugely enhanced the action - even if the haze essential to the spots' atmospheric impact occasionally fudged facial expressions on the upstage rostra and made it difficult to discern exactly what was pictured on the rear wall! The climactic arrival of the otherworldly messenger was every bit as stunning as it must be.

This Australian non-professional premiere season's definitely not one for folk squeamish about forthright language and some hot action but Heidelberg's certainly given us what's likely to be a rare opportunity to revisit a notable contribution to modern American theatre. Few companies would have made such a bold choice.