

## REVIEW: Palomar troupe soars with challenging 'Angels'

By DAN BENNETT - Staff Writer | Wednesday, April 22, 2009 9:10 AM PDT [∞](#)

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Alex Guzman as

Louis and Sean Hannify as Prior in Palomar College's productions of "Angels in America, Part 1," opening April 17 at the Howard Brubeck Theater at Palomar. (Photo courtesy of Randy Hoffman)

Among the most discussed plays of the past two decades, "Angels in America Part 1: Millennium Approaches" presents challenges for both the production team and the audience. It's long, it's frequently complex, it's blessed with both poetic abstraction and straightforward honesty and it demands the complete attention of everyone in the room.

Tackling even half of Tony Kushner's much-admired, two-part work is a tall order for a community college, but the Palomar College theater department delivers a graceful, riveting and moving production of the play's first part, not all that far from the quality I saw in the original Broadway show more than a decade ago. With fine, sharp performances, and a solid though purposely unspectacular production design, this "Angels" flies with skill.

The twisting story concerns several characters living ---- in some ways barely surviving ---- in the Reagan-era mid-'80s. The AIDS epidemic is now in full force, and affects many of the characters, including Prior (Sean Hannify), who is in the mid-stages of the disease and is losing ground fast. This decline horrifies his longtime lover Louis (Alex Guzman), who sticks around as long as he can stomach before fleeing into the arms of Joe (Daniel Hannify), a Mormon and Republican attorney who has long stifled his homosexuality but can do so no longer. Joe's long-delayed admission emotionally damages his already fragile wife, Harper

(Calandra Crane), who spends much of her time in an escapist fantasy world fueled by her depression and feelings of rejection.

Joe is tutored by the legendary attorney Roy Cohn (Jared Spears), the fiery Washington power broker who is himself dying of the disease, apparently believing he can deny all reality through sheer fury and bombast.

These characters converge in a series of scenes that advance the story, employ social and cultural commentary dealing with the mood and politics of the era, and span multiple subjects and themes. These include Judaism, Mormonism, politics, grief, anger and anguish. Also, somewhere in the din, big amounts of humor and unlikely but persistent hope, carried and distributed by a few of the characters in both subtle and overt ways. Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning script is regarded as among the most bold, audacious and well-crafted in theater.

The cast lives up to the challenge of those words, working cohesively, tempering the occasional anger sprees with quiet understanding. It's a strong ensemble, guided by director Michael Mufson, who shapes the nearly three-hour long show into a compelling entity. The college will present the second part of the piece, "Angels in America Part 2: Perestroika" in November.

"Angels in America Part 1: Millennium Approaches"

When: 4 p.m. today; 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Howard Brubeck Theatre, Palomar College, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos

Tickets: \$8-\$12

Info: (760) 744-1150, Ext. 2453

Web: [www.palomarperforms.com](http://www.palomarperforms.com)

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