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## REVIEW: Palomar's powerful 'Angels' soars

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By PAM KRAGEN - [pkragen@nctimes.com](mailto:pkragen@nctimes.com) | Posted: Wednesday, November 18, 2009 9:30 am | Loading...

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Allison Bretall as The Angel and Sean Hannify as Prior Walter in Palomar College's production of "Angels In American, Part II: Perestroika." (Photo courtesy of Melinda Finn)

"Ambitious" seems a puny word to describe Palomar College's yearlong immersion in the play "Angels in America," which concludes with four must-see performances this weekend.

Director Michael A. Mufson, his talented cast and a small army of stage crew and designers have done a remarkable and highly professional job with Tony Kushner's Pulitzer- and Tony-winning play, subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." The two-part play (with a combined six-hour running time) was produced over two semesters, with the first half, "Millennium Approaches," staged last spring, and the finale, "Perestroika," in production now. Both halves featured the same cast and production design, so there's a cohesiveness that easily bridges the time gap.

"Perestroika" picks up exactly where "Millennium" left off in a dazzling cliffhanger --- a heaven-sent Angel has crashed through the apartment ceiling of Prior Walter, a 30-year-old gay man who's been diagnosed with AIDS, and she gives him a mission ---- to arrest human progress. The rangy play tells the story of seven Manhattan residents whose lives become intertwined at the height of the AIDS epidemic in 1986, while cataclysmic change is rippling through the world, including Reagan-era politics and the dawn of "perestroika," the Soviet restructuring movement that would lead to the fall of Communism three years later.

As serious as all this sounds, the play is darkly funny, highly sensual and prone to wild flights of fancy. Plus,

the script is so well-written (and the actors' performances so uniformly excellent) that the mesmerizing three-hour play moves with powerful urgency.

In "Perestroika," the ailing Prior is unhappy to learn of his celestial appointment as a prophet. The Angel (whose arrival arouses Prior in unexpected ways) tells him that God has disappeared and mankind has bobbled the earthly ball in his absence. Beset by visions, Prior hits the streets looking for answers. Meanwhile, his ex-lover Louis, a self-adoring preppy who deserted Prior when he learned of his AIDS diagnosis, has taken up with Joe Pitt, a married Mormon Republican lawyer who has come out of the closet and deserted his Valium-popping wife, Harper.

Joe's mentor is Roy Cohn, the vile-tempered, self-loathing, closeted New York lawyer who has disguised his own AIDS diagnosis as liver cancer and has used his connections to score a fridge full of AZT (then an experimental but promising drug treatment for AIDS). Cohn (a real person, though his actions in this play are imagined) is attended by the nurturing but willful male nurse Belize (a black drag queen who is Prior's best friend), and he's haunted by the ghost of convicted Communist spy Ethel Rosenberg, whose execution he helped engineer in 1953.

As Prior grows sicker, he finds surprising companionship in Joe's mentally unstable wife Harper (who spends her days tripping on pills at a Mormon visitors center), and he finds an adviser, nurse and friend in Joe's mother, Hannah, who has sold her home in Salt Lake City and moved to New York to try to save her son's troubled marriage. With Hannah's help, Prior ascends to heaven to plead mankind's case before a panel of angels and to beg them for one more chance to get things right.

Mufson's production is intentionally spare, with just a few set pieces designed by Kris Kerr that move quickly on and offstage for the seeming dozens of scene changes (Mufson's video projections are quite effective in setting time and place). This keeps the pace moving and the action focused on the characters, who are exceptionally well drawn and beautifully portrayed by the actors.

As Prior, Sean Hannify (shorn of the wavy black locks he had last spring for "Millennium") is haunted, hollow-eyed and frightened, yet grows in hope and determination as he readies for his heavenly trial. Fiery Jared Spears steals a lot of scenes as the wickedly cruel Roy Cohn. Allison Bretall is regal and imperious as the Angel. Alex Guzman is just right as the needy, self-absorbed Louis. Calandra Crane has a comic quirkiness as Harper, and she blossoms from fragile victim to empowered, clear-eyed realist in the end. Dail Desmond Richard is especially affecting and natural as Belize, the sassy nurse with a warm heart. Sarah Blackmon is perfectly restrained both as Ethel Rosenberg (who arrives to gloat over Cohn's impending doom but ends up sending him to the afterlife with a soulful recitation of the Kaddish) and as Hannah, Joe's sorrowful mother who finds her maternal soul and sexuality in unlikely places. Danny Hannify has a boyish self-centeredness as Joe Pitt. And Samantha Jeet completes the cast in a quintet of roles, including the Bolshevik revolutionary whose play-opening speech about change in Russia closely mirrors the events in the play.

Luis Del Valle designed the dark, evocative lighting; George Gonzalez designed the costumes (which subtly show distinctions in socioeconomic status); Anthony Bushey-Anello's sound design helps the audience keep

track of the fast-moving locales (which include trips to Utah, Antarctica, Heaven and Hell) and Madigan Ray does triple duty as assistant director, props designer and stage manager.

At Sunday's matinee, the stage crew alone outnumbered the sparse audience, which is a true shame, since Palomar's production is only the third time the epic "Angels" has been produced in San Diego since the plays premiered in the early 1990s. This production deserves a bigger audience this weekend.

That being said, "Angels in America" is not for everybody. The play has strong language and sexual situations, and is not suited for young audiences. It's an honest depiction of life, love, sex and religious and political hypocrisy in the age of AIDS. And as heavy as that may sound, "Angels" concludes with a very positive, spiritual message of hope, forgiveness and redemption. As Prior tells the circle of angels, man has the power to change (the same powerful word that helped President Obama reach the White House), and it's in our collective hands to make it happen.

"Angels in America Part II: Perestroika"

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

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

Tickets: \$12, general; \$10, seniors; \$8, students (for mature audiences)

Info: 760-744-1150, ext. 2453

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

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