

## HIGH MARX

*Tony Kushner's socialist spectacular.*

BY JOHN LAHR

*Father knows best: Spinella, Cristofer, and Emond in Kushner's family drama.*

Tony Kushner compares his style of playwriting to making lasagna: “All the yummy nutritious ingredients you’ve thrown into it have almost-but-not-quite succeeded in overwhelming the design,” he wrote in 1995. “A play should have barely been rescued from the mess it might just as easily have been.” This approach has produced two signature dishes: the 1993 two-part play “Angels in America” and the 2004 musical “Caroline, or Change,” which is, to my taste, his most exquisitely made offering. The latest entrée from Kushner’s kitchen is the three-and-a-half-hour “The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures” (well wrangled by Michael Greif, at the Public)—a title that incorporates

George Bernard Shaw and Mary Baker Eddy, while teasing Kushner’s own prodigious discourses.

“The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide” takes place in 2007, in the Brooklyn town house of a seventy-two-year-old former longshoreman and Communist Party activist, Gus Marcantonio (the fierce, brooding Michael Cristofer), whose family has gathered to discuss his wish to kill himself. Whereas the questions of life and death would be sufficient ingredients for most writers, Kushner spices up the fare with dashes of Marxism, contemporary theology, Communist Party history, the labor movement, and gay activism. Out of this bubbling mélange comes an unexpectedly powerful and bittersweet taste of our post-im-

perial moment; the fractious household can be read as a metaphor for America, its characters perilously poised between remembering and forgetting, between community and atomization.

Kushner maintains that an audience’s collective I.Q. goes up about twenty-five points while watching a play, and this is certainly true of his plays. You lean into them as if into a good conversation, knowing that there will be meaty anecdote, irresistible humor, unexpected poetry, occasional longueurs, and some things that you just can’t—and you’re not even *meant* to—get. Take, for instance, Maeve (the droll Danielle Skraastad), the pregnant and manic lesbian lover of Gus’s daughter, Maria Teresa (the compelling Linda Emond), a.k.a. M.T., or “Empty,” who has been inseminated by Empty’s heterosexual younger brother, Vito, a.k.a. V. (Steven Pasquale), the most reactionary and therefore the most disappointing to Gus of his offspring. Maeve is a recent theology Ph.D., and her thesis adviser turns out to be Paul (the edgy K. Todd Freeman), the astringent black longtime partner of Gus’s older son, Pier Luigi (Stephen Spinella), a.k.a. “Pill.” When Maeve is first heard from, she’s talking shop to Gus’s sister, Clio (the subtle Brenda Wehle), a former nun and Maoist, who has been watching over Gus since his first attempt to slit his wrists, the previous year. “Maeve Ludens, Doctor of Theology, unemployed, not exactly a bull market out there for us apophatic theologians, with a, with, you know, *pronounced* kataphatic inclinations,” Maeve says, adding, “But I’m kataphatic by nature, I’m just a cockeyed kataphatist! So sue me!” Nobody, not even Clio, knows what the hell Maeve is talking about; her speech, however, plays as a hilarious piece of pretension.

The play is operatic, and Kushner is at his funniest when he hits the pure, clear note of high dudgeon. Paul, for instance, who knows that Pill is cheating on him with Eli (the excellent Michael Esper), a young Yale-educated hustler, vents his anger at Pill’s cell phone, the symbol of his betrayal. “Look at you, clinging to that phone like it was your hope for eternal salvation,” Paul snarls. “It’s just a carcinogenic little microwave bundled with silicon and arsenic and tantalite from the Congo, the mining rights for which millions upon millions of innocents have been slaughtered,

that's the devil in your hand, you heartless evil wicked faggot." Kushner can make words hop like a knuckleball. When Pill riffs about a play he's recently seen, Shaw's "Major Barbara"—"It's the emasculation of the working class by a sentimental pseudo-socialist, peddling an idealist conception of history!"—Eli replies, "Oh, yeah, baby, talk Commie talk." (Spinella, who played Prior Walter in the 1993 production of "Angels in America," understands Kushner's ambivalent music and swings it; alternately heartbreaking and hilarious, he personifies a man at two with nature.)

Gus's is the fourth generation of Italian-American Communists to occupy the town house, a symbol of the family's struggle, aspiration, and achievement in America, for which he now has a four-million-dollar offer. "I want to liquidate. And then vacate," he says. Gus demands, and gets, respect from his family; there's much to admire in his mental rigor and in his passion for justice. There's little to admire, however, in his relations with his children. Beneath his shuffling gloom, he's a manipulative, self-involved imperialist, whose strong views of history have claimed their imaginations in different ways. Pill, who, as a young man, was told by Gus that homosexuality was "symptomatic of bourgeois corruption," has eroticized Marx's notion of commodity fetishism: he's turned on by paying for sex. In fact, he's so addicted to Eli that he has borrowed thirty thousand dollars from his sister, money that was earmarked for Maeve's in-vitro fertilization. "You're commodifying your deepest self, your capacity for giving and receiving," Pill explains haplessly to Eli, whose "objectification" is also Pill's perverse way of being "true" to Paul.

Gus hides his heart from his children but he can't help showing off its coldness. He denigrates the notion that Pill, who has long been working on a dissertation on the 1934 San Francisco dockworkers' strike, is a labor historian. "He's not a, a, a *historian*. He's a high-school history [teacher]," he says. To V., who runs a construction business and whose political indoctrination was entirely overlooked by his father, Gus says, "I thought I was protecting you, sparing you, but all I did was make you an ignoramus." Even Empty, who is a labor lawyer, is castigated by her father for being too soft and for changing nothing. Both the characters and the audience find it hard to believe Gus's claim that he has in-

ipient Alzheimer's. He may have the occasional aphasic moment, but he translates Horace, expounds on his anarchist forebears, and is eloquent in his memories of the struggle for a guaranteed annual income for longshoremen. Gus's recollection of that time is an aria of idealism:

We did something utterly remarkable then, which no one now appreciates, but it was, it was working-class guys, working-class with no, no training, no politics, facing down their own fear of being called bums and featherbedders and crooks and insisting not merely on the worker's right to a wage but the worker's right to a share in the wealth, a right to be alive, a right to control time itself! When we won the Guaranteed Income, we took hold of the logic of time and money that enriches men like them and devours men like us, and we broke its fucking back.

Try speaking Kushner's words out loud and see if it doesn't bring tears to your eyes to feel, as Gus does, the immensity of what was won by protest and what has now, in our sour moment, been lost.

Over the course of the play, the children gradually peel away from Gus; in the process, they winkle out the real source of his nihilism. As a radical, Gus was dedicated to changing the balance of historical forces. But his triumph—the guaranteed annual income—was negotiated only for employees with seniority; the rest of the longshoremen got nothing. His greatest victory for the principle that labor should own the wealth it creates was bought, it turns out, at the price of another cherished principle: union. "When we agreed that some, not *all*, would get, we gave up the union, we gave up representing a *class*, we became . . . Each one for himself," he says, adding, "It all came out to nothing. . . . I pretend to forget . . . what I can't bear to have in my head."

Kushner is a liberal man, and a liberal man is too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel, as Robert Frost said. By the finale, he manages to get most of his articulate, rebarbative crew moving toward some clear-eyed resolution to their lives; he leaves Gus, however, balanced on a knife edge between the options of death and new life. I'm not sure that the play's last beats are earned or conclusive, but I am sure that "The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide," as a whole, is rich, deep, beautiful, and suggestive. On the way out, thinking about the decline of the left and the sense of loss that perfumes the play, I recalled a Fran Lebowitz line: "In the Soviet Union, capitalism triumphed over Communism; in this country, capitalism over democracy." ♦