PROFILES

AFTER ANGELS

Tony Kushner's Promethean itch.

BY JOHN LAHR

n May 2, 2004, the humid Sunday that his musical "Caroline, or Change" was to transfer from the Public Theatre, downtown, to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, on Broadway, Tony Kushner left his apartment on the Upper West Side and ambled east through Central Park. He was seeking out Bethesda Fountain and the statue of an angel that graces it to ask for blessing. For luck, on opening nights, Kushner usually performs two rituals: before the curtain goes up he sings Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine"—a song that, according to his will, must be played, along with Brahms's Fourth and Mahler's Resurrection Symphony, at his funeral ("I envision a lengthy service," he has written. "Bring lunch"); then, while the show is on, he slips away for a Chinese meal. On this occasion, however, Kushner found himself doubly in need of luck. Not only would the opening of "Caroline" mark his return to Broadway after more than a decade but a revised, nearly four-hour version of his play "Homebody/Kabul" was beginning a limited engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Kushner had last been represented on Broadway in 1993, with "Perestroika," the second part of his seven-hour epic, "Angels in America." The first major play to put homosexual life at the center of its moral debate, "Angels" covered territory that ranged from Heaven to earth, from the AIDS epidemic to conservative politics, encapsulating, in its visionary sweep, the sense of confusion and longing that defined late-twentieth-century American life. "It gave a language to that generation," the director George C. Wolfe, who staged both "Angels in America" and "Caroline, or Change" on Broadway, says. "It gave playwrights permission to think about theatre in a whole new way. A play could be poetic, ridiculous, fragile, overtly political, sentimental, and brave all at the same time." "Angels" won Kushner two Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize. Last December, HBO aired Mike Nichols's sixtymillion-dollar film version, for which Kushner adapted the play and which starred Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. (The film was nominated for twenty-one Emmys and won a record eleven.)

In Kushner's view, however, "Caroline, or Change"—a semi-autobiographical account of the relationship between a Southern Jewish boy, who has lost his mother, and his family's saturnine maid, Caroline—is his best-told story. Based on the "unexpected hidden life" of the Kushner family's maid, Maudie Lee Davis, the script is a radical departure from the standard forms of Broadway musical distraction. With its focus on race, class, and even economics, "Caroline" celebrates the ambivalent, instead of the upbeat. When it opened last year at the Public, it earned a strong critical response, not all of it positive. For some critics, the show's psychological subtlety was hidden beneath the folkloric, seemingly simplistic style of the production. ("'Caroline' might be regarded as the brooding person's 'Hairspray,'" Ben Brantley wrote in the Times.) Kushner felt, he says, "hugely disappointed" and only "cautiously, but definitely, endorsed."

Nevertheless, throughout the winter and into the spring, bolstered by the growing demand of the Public's audiences and by the success of the Nichols film, Kushner worked the phones and called in favors until a consortium of twenty Broadway producers put up five million dollars to move the musical to Broadway. No one was going to get rich, their mantra went, but Broadway would be the richer for it. The Broadway opening meant another round of reviews. "It would be lovely if suddenly there was sort of this Pauline conversion and people were coming and saying, I was wrong the first time; it's great now," Kushner said. "But that isn't going to happen. Tomorrow there'll be some wonderful things and also maybe some not-so-wonderful things. Then we have to take a deep breath and figure out how we're going to give this a respectable run on Broadway." Kushner admits that he is "preternaturally, even *prenatally*, thin-skinned." He says, "I would like to care less about the things other people say about me, but I can't imagine caring less. I think people pay heavy prices for armor and callousness." Still, he adds, "it's very hard to take criticism when it's inept, when it kills the chances of that show being seen."

For a while, he sat on the low perimeter wall of the Bethesda plaza, enjoying the scene. His gaze finally came to rest on the blousy bronze angel in the center of the fountain, which plays an important role in the finale of "Angels in America." In the Biblical tale of Bethesda, an angel appears on the surface of a pool and gives the water healing powers. The statue, Kushner explained, "commemorates the naval dead of the Civil War. It's the first commissioned sculpture by a woman in New York—Emma Stebbins, the sister of the parks board president and a lesbian." He went on, "The other thing I love about it is that it got terrible reviews when it was unveiled.'

ushner is a purveyor of what he calls K"brave art"—"the best sense we can make of our times." Several weeks before "Caroline" opened on Broadway, in a debate sponsored by the Classic Stage Company, one of Kushner's great champions, the critic Harold Bloom, spent the better part of two hours trying in vain to get Kushner to admit that he was a theological writer. "I'm somebody who believes in . . . a kind of relationship of complaint and struggle and pursuit between the human and the divine," Kushner said finally. "And part of that struggle involves politics. For me, drama without politics is inconceivable."

He is fond of quoting Melville's heroic prayer from "Mardi and a Voyage Thither" ("Better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals"), and



In theatre, Kushner is a purveyor of "brave art," which he defines as "the best sense we can make of our times."

takes an almost carnal glee in tackling the most difficult subjects in contemporary history—among them, AIDS and the conservative counter-revolution ("Angels in America"), Afghanistan and the West ("Homebody/Kabul"), German Fascism and Reaganism ("A Bright Room Called Day"), the rise of capitalism ("Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Brown"), and racism and the civil-rights movement in the South ("Caroline, or Change"). But his plays, which are invariably political, are rarely polemical. Instead, Kushner rejects ideology in favor of what he calls "a dialectically shaped truth," which must be "outrageously funny" and "absolutely agonizing," and must "move us forward." He gives voice to characters who have been rendered powerless by the forces of circumstance—a drag queen dying of AIDS, an uneducated Southern maid, contemporary Afghans—and his attempt to see all sides of their predicament has a sly subversiveness. He forces the audience to identify with the marginalized—a humanizing act of imagination.

Kushner also has what he calls "a boundless appetite" for exploring the dramatic form. An early dance-theatre piece, "La Fin de la Baleine: An Opera for the Apocalypse"—about bad love, the blues, the bomb, and bulimia—included a woman dancing on point with a

tuba and spouting water from her mouth. "Homebody/Kabul," which began with a first-person monologue, morphed into a third-person drama, moving unexpectedly from closeup to long shot. With its visions and poetic fulminations, "Angels in America" expanded the expressive limits of naturalistic theatre. Likewise, "Caroline, or Change" used its visual, sonic, and linguistic vernacular to create a kind of American folk opera, in which the worlds of white privilege and African-American impoverishment were woven together in a dreamlike fable that bore the influence of Kushner's friend Maurice Sendak, with whom he has written a children's book and an opera libretto.

Underneath Kushner's prodigious flow of language is a sense of incantation, which draws the spectator in and compels him to listen. His writing is defined by fluency and excess. He wrote the first draft of the opening monologue for "Homebody/Kabul" in forty-eight hours, "Caroline" in four and a half months, and he had just finished a two-hundredand-eighty-three-page draft of a screenplay for Steven Spielberg about the aftermath of the 1972 terrorist attack during the Olympic Games in Munich, which he wrote in three weeks. "I like big, splashy, juicy plays," Kushner says. "I like the audience to feel space to roam around in."

(He refers to Samuel Beckett as "that matzoh of a playwright.") In his 1995 collection of essays, "Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness," Kushner writes, "A good play, like good lasagna, should be overstuffed. It has a pomposity, and an overreach. Its ambitions extend in the direction of not-missing-a-trick, it has a bursting omnipotence up its sleeve."

The swashbuckling quality of Kush-I ner's intellectual aspirations is not borne out by his demeanor. At forty-eight, he is tall, courtly, unassuming, and flatfooted, with a tangle of wiry black curlshis "wackadoo hair," as his friend the director Michael Mayer calls it. He is by nature a "fummfler"—what Sendak calls "the Jewish fumbler who is in perfect control, who uses his comic character to somehow make everyone feel comfortable and loose." He talks extraordinarily fast, with a machine-gun-style delivery that reflects both his swiftness of mind and his nervousness. At the same time, his pace gives him a distinct comic advantage. When delivering the Class Day speech at Columbia University earlier this year, he reminded the students that he had been their fourth choice—after Warren Buffett, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Jon Stewart. "I think I should begin by acknowledging your disappointment that I am not Jon Stewart," he said. "Your disappointment that I am not Jon Stewart will last one morning. I am disappointed at not being Jon Stewart every morning of my life." To graduates at Bard, where he was awarded an honorary degree, he observed, "I cherish my bile duct as much as any other organ. I take good care of it. I make sure it gets its daily vitamins and antioxidants and invigorating exposure to news of Antonin Scalia and everyone else working for the Bush family." At Cooper Union, receiving another degree, he began his speech by pronouncing President Bush's words of the previous day: "Thank you and good evening. I'm honored to visit the Army War College. Generations of officers have come here to study the strategies and history of warfare. I've come here tonight to report to all Americans, and to the Iraqi people, on the strategy our nation is pursuing in Iraq and the specific steps we're taking to achieve our goals." He paused, then added, "I just wanted to feel what it felt like to say that."



"And this is our department of experimental accounting."

When Kushner speaks in public, his gambit is often to share with his audience a little secret, some complaint that downplays his own prestige: he's tired; he's nervous; he's unprepared; he's overworked; he doesn't know what to say. "He keeps dismantling himself, reminding himself of how weak he is and how many frailties he has," Nichols says. "He lets you see the vulnerability. It's part of a genius's self-protection."

"I don't look like Keanu Reeves," Kushner said in a 1994 interview. "So when people express an interest, which happens rarely but does . . . I sort of go, 'Well, why?'" Mayer says, "He's very disparaging about his chin, his nose, his weight. You don't imagine him lying on the beach in a bathing suit." Kushner is constantly at war with his body, alternately indulging and starving it. Between 1988 and 1993, when he was writing "Angels in America," he gained about a hundred pounds. "I used to say, 'I'm pregnant. I'm eating for eight," he says. Then, just as dramatically, he shrank himself down.

In 1969, when Kushner was twelve, his mother, Sylvia, learned that she had breast cancer. (After a long remission, she died of inoperable lung cancer, on August 27, 1990.) At one point, when she was in a hospital in New York, he badgered his father, William, to buy him a pocket watch, then had it engraved with the words "Cogito, Ergo Sum" (a motto he'd acquired from Marvel comic books, not Descartes). "A thinker or nothing," he explains. "Because the body, clearly, betrays."

William Kushner, a Southern Jew from Lake Charles, Louisiana, who had studied at Juilliard, had been playing first clarinet with the New Orleans Symphony when he met Sylvia Deutscher, who, as first bassoonist, was one of the first American women to hold a chair in a major orchestra. She had been a professional musician since she was twentythree. In addition to touring with Sadler's Wells and playing with the New York City Opera, she had recorded with Stravinsky and played at the first Pablo Casals Festival. Kushner says of his mother's music, "That nasal but open-throated, deep wooden vibrato sound echoed through my childhood. I think the idea of fluency made itself felt in me as something musical before it became something

lingual. She had huge lung power. She could breathe into a candle flame and control the flicker of it with her breath." He also says, "She saved a good deal of her truthfulness, the things she couldn't say in the quotidian, for her music."

The youngest of four children from a first-generation socialist Jewish family in New York, Sylvia was noisy and emotional. Her father, an early member of

the glazier's union, had been fierce and abusive. As a result, according to her sister, Martha Deutscher, Sylvia "was a needy person who was massively insecure about herself." Kushner's older sister, the artist Lesley Kushner, was born, in 1954, with severe hearing loss; she couldn't speak and couldn't easily comprehend what was said to her. Her frustration kept her in a more or less permanent tantrum. To spend more time with her

and Tony, William and Sylvia, then in their early thirties and playing for the New York City Opera, decided to move back to Lake Charles, where William could earn a living in his father's lumber business. But Sylvia felt isolated in the South. "Leaving music professionally was very difficult for her," William says. "She hadn't succeeded as an artist," Kushner explains. "There was a sense of the world having not gotten her, and not appreciated her. She was furious about it."

When Kushner was born, in 1956, he entered a family dominated by an atmosphere of regret, disappointment, and, in the case of his older sister, murderous rage. "There was just no way to tell her, no way to make her understand," William recalls of Lesley's rancor over the sudden appearance of her brother. She had to be physically removed from Kushner's thirdbirthday party; when her father drove her away from the house, she tried to throw herself out of the car. The brutality of her behavior was, William says, "pretty devastating" to Tony—"it gave him a great sympathy with other people who were mistreated." Until Kushner reached high school, he and Lesley were at war. Adding to the tension, according to Kushner, was the fact that Sylvia had different notions of femininity than Lesley, who was a tomboy. "She took you and kind of rejected me," Lesley wrote in a recent e-mail to Tony. "Or as she put it, 'My father was an angry man and you were angry so I gave you to Daddy." A third child, Eric, who was born in 1961, absorbed his parents' professional ambitions. "They pushed Eric into music," Lesley says. "Every single week, they would drive him to New Orleans for horn lessons, four hours each way." (Eric is now first horn for the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.)

In 1969, Sylvia underwent a mas-

tectomy, and nine years later William became the maestro of the Lake Charles Symphony—events that changed the family dynamic. While Lesley and Eric gravitated toward their father, Tony maintained the closest bond to Sylvia. From an early age, he'd been a fervent reader of comics—"I wanted to write books, to be an illustrator," he says. He made up his own stories for the comic characters and wrote

their dialogue. "Momma read them and would delight in them," Lesley recalls. "She thought they were funny. Everything he said she just found delightful." Tony was equally enchanted by his mother, who had theatrical aspirations. At six, he watched her perform in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" at the local theatre-in-the-round. "As Linda Loman, she changed from my beautiful young mother... to an old woman in the course of the evening," he wrote in 1997. "It was terrifying and wonderful. . . . I don't think I ever saw her the same way again." Over the years, he watched Sylvia play Anne Frank's mother, and Beatrice in "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Manin-the-Moon Marigolds.""I really think that it was seeing those plays and the special sort of power that her being in them gave to them that started me on a lifelong fascination with the theatre," he has said.

Kushner has come to realize that William's love of writing—he and his family were great reciters of poetry and doggerel—was also an important influence on him. But, in his youth, what he got from his father was a sense of worry—the idea "that there was something wrong that he was trying to fix." As a boy, Kushner was not assertive or athletic. "I would become angry with Tony, frustrated with his helplessness," William says. "He wanted something from me that I wasn't giving him," Kushner recalls. William



"Why don't we just stay by this rock and take day trips around the local area?"

tried unsuccessfully to interest him in chess, ball games, bird-watching, sailing, and an Outward Bound course (they got as far as the orientation meeting). Around puberty, he began to give his son pep talks about sex. Kushner says, "As I got older, he figured it out. He finally said, 'I think you're a homosexual, and I want you not to be a homosexual. I want you to go to a therapist and fix it.' I was about sixteen."

Kushner had known that he was gay for almost a decade. He remembers rubbing the shoulders of his handsome Sunday-school teacher and thinking, Oh, this is fun, and also I shouldn't be doing this. Those impulses sent him through childhood with a sense of fraudulence. "You feel you are unacceptable to everyone, even to your parents, who love you but wouldn't if they knew," Kushner says. His persistent nightmare was of his classmates finding out "and killing me or burning the house down." His high-school friend Tom Tolin, an economist, says, "I remember him sitting in the bleachers and these guys around him giving him a hard time, calling him 'Kush-Kush.' He just sat there with his head buried in a book. It was painful." Kushner recalls, "I hated the kids that I was going to school with, the boys especially—aggressive, nasty, physically intimidating. I

didn't know how to get protection, because I was too embarrassed."

For years, Kushner was, by his own admission, a terrible student. Then, to his astonishment, in high school he became a verbal athlete: a champion debater. "I may have been a sissy, but I was not without aggression," he says. "I became this incredibly mean arguer. I would not be defeated." He was also opinionated: in high school, he refused to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance; he leafletted Ku Klux Klan members for George Mc-Govern; as early as junior high school, he alone on his debate team argued in favor of feminism. But his talent gave him, for the first time, a sense of his own power and a society to which he belonged. "I found the smart kids," he says.

As Kushner was finding his lung power, his mother was losing hers. In 1969, following her mastectomy, she was overradiated and developed osteomyelitis in her ribs, some of which had to be removed. "She was in a lot of pain, couldn't laugh, couldn't be hugged, and, of course, she couldn't play the bassoon," Kushner says. Her ambition settled instead on Tony, whose Promethean itch had its origins in her aspirations for him. "It was this huge thing to her if I succeeded," he says. "I don't recall her ever lavishing a huge

amount of praise on me, but I remember the thrill in her voice when I told her I had won some debate tournament, or when I got an agent, or when I got a grant or a good review or any indication that what she expected—which was that I would be a successful artist—was going to come to pass. She would simply say, 'Go! Go! Go!' in a crescendo of pitch and volume, when I brought her good news." Speaking of the special connection between Sylvia and her children, Lesley says, "She kind of moved into your skin with you. You couldn't tell if it was what you wanted for yourself or what she wanted for you. It was a sort of ventriloquist sensation." When Kushner was accepted to the graduate program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Sylvia came to see him a couple of times a year. "She visited with him and nobody else," Martha Deutscher says. "It was always the two of them." Once, when Sylvia, Kushner, and Deutscher were having coffee in the Village, Kushner and his aunt began to tease his mother about some of her attitudes. "She turned to me and said, 'Don't you turn my son against me!" Deutscher recalls. "She was not joking. She didn't want to share him."

When Kushner's play "A Bright Room Called Day" was staged in London in 1988, Sylvia flew over for the opening. It was panned. "She collapsed," Deutscher says. "When my mother died, I realized that a certain degree of my ability to take pleasure in my own accomplishments was gone," Kushner says. "Without her to show it to, to do it for—a circuit had been broken." Above his writing desk at his country house, in Manitou, New York, is a huge framed copy—signed by the poet—of Robert Duncan's "My Mother Would Be a Falconress," which reads, in part:

My mother would be a falconress, and I her gerfalcon, raised at her will, from her wrist sent flying, as if I were her own pride, as if her pride knew no limits, as if her mind sought in me flight beyond the horizon.

Sexuality was one of the ways in which Kushner broke away from his mother and, like the poem's falcon, flew "far, far beyond the curb of her will." Kushner's parents had hoped that with therapy his latent heterosexuality could be reinforced. When he was twenty-five,

he called home to tell Sylvia that he was gay. "She cried for a month," he says. "She was just heartbroken by it. I finally said, 'I'm not going to call you anymore until you stop, because it's getting creepy. I feel like I've died.'"

Although he now refers to his "desirebased identity" and an "endlessly raging libido," he had difficulty, at first, accepting his orientation. In his second week as an undergraduate at Columbia, in 1974, Kushner presented himself at the health center and asked to see a therapist. "I'm gay and I want to be straight," he said. He is, he says, "sexually flusterable." "The first time I ever saw two men kiss was when I was a freshman at Columbia and it completely freaked me out," he said in an interview last year. "It still took another three years before I began to come out of the closet." When Kushner did come out, according to the actor Stephen Spinella—who met Kushner in graduate school at New York University, and later starred in "Angels in America"—"he exploded. It was like a train. He was out, out, out."

A decade later, in 1995, Kushner and Michael Mayer, who had also met as students at N.Y.U., found themselves, in the company of such celebrities as Roy Lichtenstein and Bob Hope, at the White House, during the first term of the Clinton Administration. Kushner was seated at Al Gore's table. "I wore a triangle made out of pink rhinestones. Gore asked me what it was and I got to explain it to him," Kushner recalls. After dinner, there was a dance. "We were slowdancing together next to Senator Alan Simpson and his wife, the Gores, everyone," Mayer recalls. "We may be the first men ever to dance together in the White House."

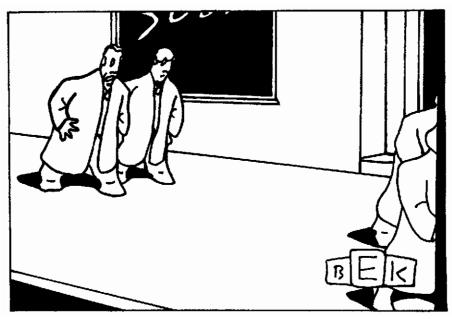
Kushner, in his senior year at Columbia, took Edward Tayler's famous course on Shakespeare. "Tayler taught Shakespeare in a profoundly dialectical way," Kushner says. To understand Shakespeare, Tayler told his students, "you only need to count to two." From him, Kushner learned that everything in Shakespeare was paradoxical and contradictory—and that this collision of opposites was the first principle of drama. He left Tayler's lecture on "Henry IV, Part 1" "shaking and in a fog." He recalls, "I was having trouble breathing. I felt like, Oh, I'm beginning to

understand something about life, the idea that a thing can be both one thing and its opposite, that two opposites can exist simultaneously and not cancel each other out. Or they can transform one another through conflict into something new." Kushner had already gravitated toward the stage. He had attended theatre and opera in New York, designed sets and props for university productions of "The Fantasticks" and "Marat/Sade," served for a year and a half as the drama critic of the Columbia Spectator, and written his first dialogue in a playwriting class. By the time he graduated, he had also fallen under the spell of Brecht's "A Short Organum for the Theatre," which set out the playwright's aesthetic for epic theatre—his attempt to engage the audience in a play of contradiction that encouraged active critical thought and departed from the passive emotional catharsis encouraged by the Aristotelian principles of drama. "I wanted to be Bertolt Brecht," Kushner says. He applied to N.Y.U., and, once there, studied under the German-born director Carl Weber, a Brecht specialist.

In his senior year at Columbia, while directing a university production of Ben Jonson's sprawling epic "Bartholomew Fair," Kushner had become friends with Kimberly Flynn, a Barnard psychology major from New Orleans, who was working on the stage crew. "We fit together intellectually and, in some ways, emotionally, on a kind of molecular level," he says. Kushner and Flynn went every-

where together; they had no secrets. Flynn had, Kushner says, a "vast appetite for pedagogy—she loves explaining things to people" and was "a great synthesizer." Kushner, in turn, had a vast curiosity. "She led and I followed," he says. "She read Walter Benjamin and told me I should. And Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer. I had read some Freud and some Marx, but not nearly as widely." He continues, "As soon as I started writing, or constructing plays, she would read, comment, make suggestions. I would call her my dramaturge, but Kim was that to the power of twenty." Inevitably, though, there were struggles over ownership of ideas. In 1982, Kushner formed a theatre company with several people, including Flynn and his first boyfriend, Mark Bronnenberg, to produce "La Fin de la Baleine," among other plays. Flynn contributed the ideas; Kushner created the stage images, and got most of the credit for the show, which caused some bad feeling between the friends.

In 1984, Flynn was riding in a cab as it sped up the West Side Highway when the car went out of control and off the road, ramming into a tree in Riverside Park. During the next few days at the hospital, Flynn's garbled sentences, her repetitions, and her inability to distinguish left from right indicated to her, even before the doctors confirmed it, that she had suffered brain damage. Just as Kushner's theatrical career was taking off—he was appointed the assistant director of the St. Louis



"I just get a little tense before everything."

Repertory Theatre in 1985, and became the associate artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop in 1987—Flynn was stymied, and she directed some of her enormous fury at Kushner. She told The New Yorker, "It was hard to deal with how angry I was, and with the idea that I was jealous and that I was in no position to be jealous-I was out of the game." Kushner agonized over moving to St. Louis. "I've had to make the hardest decisions of my life around Kim's illness," he has said. His guilt about her disaster and the difficulty of taking care of her is evident in "Millennium Approaches," the first part of "Angels in America." "She was everywhere in it," he says. (He gave Flynn ten per cent of the profits.)

Flynn eventually recovered sufficiently to become a full-time political activist, focussing on environmental issues. But in 1996, right before Kushner began work on "Homebody" and "Caroline," he and Flynn decided to alter the nature of their friendship. "We tried very hard to figure out a way of staying close," he says. "We were just making each other, by the end, terribly, terribly unhappy." He continues, "It was an important turning point for me." In his cramped one-room office in Union Square, Kushner keeps a photograph of himself with Flynn at Bethesda Fountain.

Kushner's "A Bright Room Called Day," which is dedicated, in part, to Flynn, crosscut the effect of the rise of Hitler on a group of friends in Berlin in the early thirties with a rant on American politics that linked Fascism with the Reagan revolution. It was meant, Kushner says, as "a warning signal, not a prediction." The play, which was workshopped in New York in 1985, drew little press attention, but the director Oskar Eustis saw one of the performances. "Tony's gift for language was completely apparent," he says. "He was deeply, specifically interested in politics, in political theory and how it related to political practice." He goes on, "'Bright Room' was about what all Tony's plays are about—people who feel themselves inadequate for the demands that history has put on them."

Eustis produced and directed "Bright Room" in 1987 at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre, where it had a succès d'estime. But East Coast critics were less enthusiastic when they saw a reworked version in 1991 at the Public Theatre in New York. "A fatuous new drama," Frank Rich called it in the Times. "An early front-runner for the most infuriating play of 1991." For all its intelligence and ambition, the play was dramatically inert. "I made an outline of twenty-four scenes," Kushner says. "I wrote twenty-four scenes. Each scene was exactly what I put down in the outline." Eustis says, "Tony understood everything else about theatre, but he didn't understand about reversals, how that worked. The theatre is about change, so change has to happen in the course of the play. In 'Bright Room,' you'd have scene after scene of characters coming out, beautifully expressing how they feel, then leaving the stage without changing at all."

After the San Francisco run ended, Kushner began work on what he envisioned as a taut, one-set musical about AIDS. As he started to write for the first time about his own time and place—about homosexuality, AIDS, and rightwing American politics—the play quickly began to exceed his ambitions for it. "For the first-rate artist, there is a moment when he's really getting revved up, and the time just flows into him," Mike Nichols says. "It only happens once. It happens without his awareness at all. He planned nothing. He was just going ahead doing this next thing."

As Kushner was writing "Angels in America," he gave himself to the characters, not to the outline; instead of imposing an ideology on them, he followed their lead. "I was two acts into 'Millennium' and I didn't know what the fuck I was doing," he says. "So I thought, I'm gonna ask a character. Who's most like me? Louis. So I sat down, and I said, 'What is this play about?' I waited a few minutes and then 'Why has democracy succeeded in America?' popped into my head. Then Louis began to qualify himself, as he always did—the first of my big logorrheics. I wrote the line 'There are no angels in America.' Then I wrote on the side to myself, 'Louis is wrong.'" The story seemed to suggest itself from there. Still, the writing wasn't easy for Kush-



ner. "I can't get these people to change fast enough," he complained to Eustis. "At first, I thought he was being self-indulgent," Eustis says. "What became clear is that the difficulty in these people changing was the subject of the play."

What eventually emerged was an epic discourse on American life that mixed social reality with theatrical fantasy, naturalism with Judaism and magical realism. It told its story in numerous dialects—camp, black, Jewish, Wasp, even Biblical tones. At the same time, it provided a detailed map of the nation's sense of loss. "Millennium Approaches" charts the heyday of the Reagan Presidency through a series of characters who ruthlessly pursue their own sexual and public destinies: Prior Walter, an AIDS patient, is abandoned by his lover, Louis, at the time of his most profound need; Joe, an ambitious bisexual Mormon Republican chief clerk, leaves his lost, pill-popping wife, Harper, for a man; and Roy Cohn, the notorious right-wing lawyer and fixer, a closeted homosexual who is also dying of AIDS, rationalizes his own sensational rapacity. (Cohn, whom Kushner portrayed with Jacobean relish, personifies the barbarity of individualism.) In "Perestroika," which ends four years after "Millennium," in 1990, Kushner explores the possibility of progress and community, of redemption. Harper finally accepts the failure of her marriage and sets out on her own. Louis reconciles with Prior—in a scene that took Kushner years to write. "Failing in love isn't the same as not loving," Louis says. "It doesn't let you off the hook, it doesn't mean . . . you're free to not love."

Twenty-four characters, eight acts, fifty-nine scenes, and an epilogue: "Angels in America" turned the struggle of a minority into a metaphor for America's search for self-definition. "I hate this country," a gay black nurse called Belize says to Louis. "It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody can reach it." Although "Angels" was not the first play to explore the AIDS pandemic—Larry Kramer's polemical "The Normal Heart" (1985) preceded it—it was the first to explore the particular claim of the disenfranchised to a romantic vision of America. "We will be citizens," Prior announces to the audi-



"Can I have a pony?"

ence at the finale. "The time has come."

By the fall of 1988, it had become clear that the play would need two evenings to run its course, which meant that Eustis couldn't afford to produce it at the Eureka Theatre. "A two-evening show about AIDS by a playwright nobody had heard of. I mean, it was just disastrous," Eustis says. In the end, he chose the play over his theatre company. He left the Eureka for the Mark Taper Forum, in Los Angeles, where the artistic director, Gordon Davidson, had agreed to workshop "Millennium" and, eventually, to mount both halves of the play together under Eustis's directorship. The plan took a few years to complete. It wasn't until the spring of 1991, almost a year after Kushner's mother had died, that he was able to wrench the three-hundred-page draft of "Perestroika" out of himself—in an eight-day writing spree in a cabin on the Russian River, in Northern California, where he holed up with a box full of junk food and cold cuts. "I would sleep two hours at a stretch, get up, write the next scene, and it just went on and on," he says. He finished the play on April 11th. "It was maybe one of the

happiest days of my entire life," he says.

"Millennium" had its first major production in Declan Donnellan's version at London's Royal National Theatre, in January, 1992. After a workshop of "Perestroika" at the Taper in May of that year, both parts of the play were performed together for the first time, over two nights, in November. By then, "Millennium" had won the London *Evening* Standard's award for best play. When the Mark Taper box office opened for the complete production of "Angels," the receipts broke the theatre's record. At the Taper première, most of New York's theatrical establishment and its major critics were in the audience. Backstage, Kushner wrote a letter to the cast and pinned it on the bulletin board. "And how else should an angel land on earth but with the utmost difficulty?" it said. "If we are to be visited by angels we will have to call them down with sweat and strain, we will have to drag them out of the skies."

The plays, if not the Taper production, were triumphant. "Angels" was hailed as a turning point for theatre, for gay life, and for American culture. Frank Rich, in the

Times, spoke of "Angels" as "this vast, miraculous play," and Variety went even further: "Angels in America' is a monumental achievement, the work of a defiantly theatrical imagination." In Charlotte, North Carolina—and in university towns in rural parts of Indiana and Texas-fundamentalists staged protests to stop subsequent local productions, a move that Kushner referred to in *The Nation* as "unconstitutional, undemocratic and deeply unwise." (A decade later, when the Nichols film aired on television, the climate of tolerance that "Angels" helped to create was used as a criticism of the play. When Kushner begins writing, he jokes about needing to banish his "inner John Simon," the voice of the acerbic theatre critic of New York, whom he imagines saying, "You're completely terrible and everything you write is shit." But Simon's attacks real or imagined—are nothing compared with the grapeshot vitriol of Lee Seigel in The New Republic. "Angels in America' is a second-rate play written by a second-rate playwright who happens to be gay, and because he has written a play about being gay, and about AIDS, no one—and I mean

no one—is going to call 'Angels in America' the overwrought, coarse, posturing, formulaic mess that it is," Seigel wrote.)

fter "Angels in America," Kushner A found it hard to start another play. Nonetheless, he wanted to be useful. He thought about training to be a teacher, a lawyer, a nurse. Instead, according to Eustis, "he reinvented himself as a public intellectual," becoming, among other things, one of America's most prominent gay-rights activists. His essays—some of which began as speeches delivered at gayrights events—addressed sex, homosexual liberation, and socialism. He argued in defense of the activist and playwright Larry Kramer; of the controversial choreographer Bill T. Jones; and of Matthew Shepard, the Wyoming student who was murdered because of his sexuality. "Campaign for homosexual and all civil rights-campaign, not just passively support," Kushner exhorted the readers of his article on Shepard, which appeared in *The Nation* in 1998. "Matthew Shepard shouldn't have died. We should all burn with shame."

In 1995, Kushner was asked by President Clinton to submit some ideas for the forthcoming State of the Union address. In a letter, Kushner set out the tenets of his version of American democracy: "You need to be the full-blooded liberal Democrat I believe you want to be. You need to tell the American people that you stand for a strong Federal government, fully empowered to regulate industry, protect the jobs and lives of American workers, and protect our extremely endangered environment (and our health along with it). You have to declare war on the anti-tax, anti-government movement, calling it what it is: a scam perpetrated against the middle class, the working class and the poor in the interests of maximizing profits for multinational corporations and the very rich.... You have to have the courage you had in 1992 to declare that grown-up responsible citizens of a democracy pay taxes." He ended his eight-page letter with a plea for social justice: "You must support affirmative action, poverty, education, child care and jobs creation programs, and anti-discrimination legislation which includes sexual orientation." (Clinton read the letter, but nothing from it made it into the speech.)

These days, when Kushner visits college campuses, where he can command

CRUELTY

(Vermont, 1965)

That was the year my friends were reading Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet. The idea of cruelty felt important, like being so perfect an outlaw you became a saint. The war was on, muffled, distant. Where we were everything happened a few years later than it did in New York or San Francisco. Some would say it was too easy for us to be there, talking about almost anything. Too easy now to say we didn't have a clue. I made it through the first few chapters of Artaud, and never got to "Saint Genet," although I remember the cover clearly, the dome of his head, his eyes, the stare

more than twelve thousand dollars a talk, he is the equivalent of a rock star. (Once when he spoke at Brown, loudspeakers had to be placed outside the hall for the overflow audience; last April, at Middlebury, in the school's auditorium, he spoke to a standing-room-only crowd.) Still, Kushner is a playwright who is an activist, not an activist who happens to write plays. One of the few serious playwrights who know how to write a joke, he is also one of the few political speakers who know how to deliver one. "When Republicans are upset, they fall over. Have you noticed this?" he asked Cooper Union's graduating class last June, before pointing out that Nixon had tripped at a New Orleans trade show, Gerald Ford often fell down stairs, Bush senior had fallen and then vomited on the Japanese Prime Minister ("And he was the Bush who was good at foreign relations!"), and Bush junior had collapsed while eating a pretzel. "What are they expressing, these falling people?" he asked. "A spiritual vertigo? The insupportable weight of all the power and ponderous wealth they have arrogated



unto themselves, beneath which their legs eventually buckle? . . . Is it an unseemly yet uncontrollable desire to slither?"

The apotheosis of Kushner's kvetching persona was his appearance, in robe and slippers, at a fund-raising event for Friends in Deed, a charity that provides support for people with life-threatening diseases. Declaiming at a panic-stricken Gilbert-and-Sullivan clip, he read from his "diary":

Wednesday, August 28, 2002. Mike Nichols called today. He wants a favor: Could I write a funny ten-minute play for a benefit for some group he's on the board of, Friends of something-or-other. I love Mike. I would do anything for him. There's no one I admire or adore more in the whole industry, maybe in the whole world. He's really a great man, so busy and yet has the time to organize something like this. Wow! Me sharing the stage with six other incredibly intimidating playwrights of whom I am insanely jealous. Sounds like fun! I'm sure Mike doesn't love Robbie Baitz more than me.

"Two people alone on an empty stage for ten minutes." They can't mean a literally empty stage. Props and costumes, surely. And sets. Maybe five people. Would anyone complain if mine was fifteen minutes long? And does it have to be funny? Funny is hard. I wonder if we get paid for this. . . .

Friday, October 25, 2002. I have a cold. I think I'm gaining weight again. I wish Mike had never asked me. I can't write. . . . Why did Mike ask me? Maybe he was mad at me. Maybe he's resentful that he's been stuck filming my play since before the first Bush administration and he's doing this to humiliate me. I bet he wishes he could call Nora Ephron in for rewrites. . . . My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? STEVE MARTIN is writing one! I'm doomed! It's not a competition. It's not a competition. . . .

that claimed he knew something I would never know. My friends moved on to de Sade. And now it occurs to me that during all those years I never said "I love you" to anyone, although I probably should have lied at least twice, to see if it was a lie. Meanwhile, the fields and mountains promised to remain the same, and they didn't. Great poems told us that nature would never betray us, but that really wasn't the point, was it? And then the theatre of cruelty stopped being shocking. We all knew why.

—Lawrence Raab

Tuesday, November 5, 2002. I couldn't write today, I had to go vote. I am optimistic, no matter what the polls say. Tomorrow, WITHOUT FAIL, I will write this play. . . . I will be in a good mood after the election. It'll be easier to write then.

Wednesday, November 6, 2002. I wish I was dead. . . .

Wednesday, November 13, 2002. . . . Something will come. ANYTHING. Who cares? It's a benefit, for God's sake! They took my name off the goddam ad! . . .

Thursday, November 14, 2002. Mike just nixed my idea: a Nichols and May reunion. "Two people alone on an empty stage," that's what he said. And then he refuses to cooperate! He's ruined everything. Thanks a LOT, Mike. Schmuck! See if I ever do you a favor again!

Tf Kushner's laughter is combustible, so, Lin certain theatrical circumstances, is his temper. Eustis recalls, "One time, after seeing a run-through of 'The Illusion'"— Kushner's 1989 adaptation of Corneille's comedy and his first commercial success—"he called me from his apartment after he'd destroyed every piece of furniture." He adds, "There was one particular moment where Tony told me that it was a mistake for me to ever have directed and I should give up the field. That was devastating. I can't tell you how many directors he's tried to get fired at crucial moments in the process." Although Eustis didn't finish the job on "Angels," Kushner has worked hard to make sure that their relationship didn't end there and he now pays Eustis to dramaturge his plays. "I

still consider Oskar one of my most important collaborators," Kushner says. "I spend hours with him weekly when I'm writing, talking about what I'm doing. I send him everything I write."

For Broadway, George Wolfe was brought in to energize the production of "Angels." "Tony is nothing if not intrusive," Wolfe says. "He completely trusts me, but I think, ultimately, he'd prefer to do it himself." Wolfe admits to occasionally burning Kushner's extensive and fevered production notes, "because I get so hostile about some of the things he writes." As a play gets closer to previews, according to Wolfe, "his mind, not having a lot to do, starts to obsess about everybody else's work. He starts to spin his wheels. Now, the first time you encounter the spinning of the wheels you try to go inside and figure out every single spoke of the wheel. Then, over time, you go, 'Madness, madness, madness, madness, oh, really strong truth. Let me hold on to that.' You have to reach inside the hurricane and pull out that beautiful little baby." Kushner is quite aware that Wolfe thinks he's a few sandwiches short of a picnic. "He doesn't think I'm insane, just a very neurotic person," Kushner says. "We were at dinner somewhere, and he looked at a bouquet of beautiful flowers. 'This is what you're like,' he said, and snapped off one of the smallest flowers. Oh, now the whole thing is completely ruined."

Kushner's intrusiveness was so perva-

sive that, while "Caroline, or Change" was in rehearsals, Wolfe and the company made a legend of it. They were working in the large, high-ceilinged Martinson auditorium at the Public Theatre—where a roof window looks down on the stage—when a pebble fell down onto the floor. Wolfe joked, "Tony's hiding up there. Jeanine"—Jeanine Tesori, who wrote the music for "Caroline"— "takes food up there so he can eat while watching us 'destroying' his piece."

Taking issue with Kushner is not easy. "It's like standing in front of a Mack truck," Tesori says. A few days before the show was to open on Broadway, she and Kushner still hadn't fine-tuned the epilogue. Wolfe insisted that he needed the scene the following night. Sitting at a table in her studio, Tesori said to Kushner, "It's too long."

"No, it's not," he replied. "Sometimes you need length. 'Angels' is full of places that shouldn't work but do, and they're long."

"I don't care what worked in that," Tesori said. "That's not this. It's too long."

"Well, we're just gonna have to agree to disagree."

"Well, we're just gonna have to stare at each other till one of us does something," Tesori said.

For ten minutes or so, Kushner and Tesori stared at each other in silence.

"Finally, he conceded, 'Well, maybe we can move the first line?' "Tesori recalls. "I said, 'Maybe we could.' Then he started shifting."

Tn May, Kushner broke his usual pattern Land agreed to attend the Broadway opening of "Caroline," along with Mark Harris, his partner of six years, whom he married in a ceremony on April 27, 2003. (They were the first same-sex couple to have their wedding announced in the "Vows" column of the Sunday Times.) By the time the couple took their seats at the Eugene O'Neill-they were in Row T of the orchestra, the seats farthest from the stage—they had already consumed their lucky sesame noodles and dumplings and Kushner had successfully sung "Begin the Beguine." The lights went down, and Kushner leaned forward, with his chin in his hands, to watch as the reimagined drab basement of his childhood home came into view and Caroline, played by Tonya Pinkins, entered

with an armful of laundry to broadcast the mood of the brooding household:

Nothing ever happen underground In Louisiana 'Cause they ain't no underground In Louisiana There is only Underwater.

When the show was over, the audience, including Kushner, stood and cheered. Then he slipped into the aisle, where he, Tesori, and Wolfe, with their arms around each other and their heads touching, jumped up and down in a huddle. A few minutes later, for the first time on an opening night, Kushner took a bow from the stage. He made a dismissive flourish to the crowd with his left hand, then disappeared into the back row of the cast. Afterward, when the rehearsal light was up and only a few people lingered in the orchestra, Kushner looked at the ropes and winches and out at the empty auditorium. "Western civilization can't have been so terrible if it made a machine like this," he said. "It really is a great gadget."

The joy of the opening dissipated in the following weeks under the pressure of the awards season, which was likely to decide the commercial future of the show. The prospect of competing in the musicals category rattled Kushner, who saw "Caroline" as "more like a play." In an e-mail, he wrote, "'Caroline' has as much in common with the shows it's up against, some of which I really like, as marquetry has to do with Olympic tobogganing. It makes me nuts." In the end, "Caroline" won only one Tony, losing the awards for best musical and for best book to "Avenue Q," a jaunty show with puppets. But by the time "Caroline" got its closing notice, in mid-July—its final Broadway performance was on August 29th—Kushner had fought his way through the gloom. "I'm devastated but fine," he said. "I can't join in with the general lamentation over the wretched state of Broadway, which has never really been in any other kind of state." ("Caroline," at least, has had a second life at the Ahmanson Theatre, in Los Angeles, and will open this month in San Francisco.)

On a hazy afternoon in late June, Kushner and I drove to his country place in Manitou, in the Hudson Valley, a two-story house, with forest-green shingles and a red door, shaded on all sides by towering maples and oaks. Through the sloping trees, the river was visible. Amtrak's Hudson Line hugged the shore, and every twenty minutes or so a train hurtled by, blaring its presence. Kushner barely registered the sound. "I always write best here," he said. "It reminds me of Louisiana, in that it's so verdant." He went on, "Inside me, it's like a fist unclenching."

For Kushner, the house has other happy associations. When he found it, six years ago, he had been ready to renounce New York altogether. "I thought, Fuck this," he says. "I'm just giving up on men. It hasn't happened. It's not going to happen. I'll give up and move out of the city." Kushner closed on the house in March of 1998; on April 16th of that year, at a party given by Michael Mayer, he met Harris, a droll and intelligent man, seven years his junior, and an editor at large at Entertainment Weekly. "Tony had this lovely combination of brazen confidence, enthusiasm, and huge insecurity that I found appealing," Harris recalls. A few days later, Kushner invited Harris to dinner at his place and prepared about five pounds of pasta. "This was so Tony," Harris says. "It was like a cauldron the size of a chemical-waste container on his stove. He bought a focaccia the size of a tire. He'd made a salad that could comfortably feed ten. I was completely terrified. 'This guy is gonna think I hate his food because he's given me a week's worth."

Kushner stayed in the city, but Manitou is still his favorite retreat. In his house, he has gathered pictures of Sylvia and her bassoon and of William and his clarinet, as well as the last photograph taken of his maternal great-grandparents in Vilnius before the Holocaust. Even the light fixtures outside his front door carry a memory of the past—they are from Temple Sinai, his childhood synagogue, in Lake Charles. Above his desk, in a cabin at the bottom of the garden, where he goes to write, hangs a photograph of Tennessee Williams, smiling over a bottle of wine. Harold Bloom told Kushner recently that Williams "is your most distinguished ancestor in the American drama and one who I think you'll wind up rivalling." The two playwrights share, at least, a belief that struggle is the natural order of things. "I'm deeply aware of what developmental psychologists call 'optimal frustration," Kushner says. "The way children learn is that the task they have in front of them is always a little too difficult and forces a degree of concentrated angry attention. It should be a struggle. It's fun to struggle. We're born to it."

Just as he was leaving Manitou, Kushner got a call from a distraught Larry Kramer, whose play "The Normal Heart," recently revived at the Public, had failed to find Broadway backing. Kramer was calling to say that the producers were closing the show that night. Kushner paced the driveway, commiserating, and they agreed to lament together over dinner. "We'll meet up and set ourselves on fire," he said.

couple of weeks later, Kushner was **A** back at work, mixing his activism with his art. For a MoveOn.org fundraiser last summer, he went back to "Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy," a play-in-progress that depicts Laura Bush attending an afterschool reading program for dead Iraqi children. For the event, he added a second scene, in which the First Lady, an admirer of Dostoyevsky's writing, comes onstage to debate the play's literary merits with the playwright himself. Since the first scene was published in The Nation—the first play that the magazine has printed in its hundred-and-thirtynine-year history—Patricia Clarkson, Marcia Gay Harden, and Vanessa Redgrave have all played the role of Laura Bush, who was invited to read the part herself. (Her office did not respond.)

Kushner likes to collect amusing tidbits about political figures. According to his research, Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist has led judges and lawyers in sing-alongs of "Dixie"; Judge Jay S. Bybee, who wrote a controversial memo justifying torture, plays in an allkazoo orchestra; and President Bush refers to the First Lady as "my lump in the bed." In the new scene of "Only We Who Guard," Kushner, in full "fummfle," brings this up. "So I guess my point is that we're all like you," his character says to Laura Bush. "That we're all being fucked by your husband." The First Lady takes umbrage and gets up to leave. As a parting shot, she scolds Kushner. "Using the stage, the theatre, ART! For, for tawdry propagandizing? You oughta be ashamed of yourself," she says.

"I always am," Kushner replies. •