

After 30 years epic is still fresh

THEATRE

ANGELS IN AMERICA: A GAY FANTASIA ON NATIONAL THEMES

★★★★★

Old Fitz Theatre, February 19-20

Reviewed by **JOYCE MORGAN**

How many angels can you fit on the tiny Old Fitz stage? More than you might think.

With its sweeping vision and seven-hour duration, this two-part epic works surprisingly well in this bare-bones production. It finely balances its intimate scenes without sacrificing the play's transcendent, hallucinatory grandeur.

Angels in America was hailed as one of the great 20th century American plays when it premiered nearly three decades ago at the height of the AIDS/HIV epidemic.

While not eradicated, these are no longer the death sentences they were when Tony Kushner penned his play set in the Reagan era. So how well does it stand up?

Kushner subtitled his play *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, and those themes – immigration, climate change, religious faith, political and judicial corruption

and the cost of denial – seem increasingly relevant given the convulsions in the US political and cultural landscape.

The key role of the sleazy, morally bankrupt Roy Cohn especially takes on new relevance in the Trump era. Cohn was based on the real high-profile, right-wing lawyer, a closet gay who died of AIDS in 1986.

A ruthless, bombastic manipulator, he mentored a young Donald Trump. Cohn boasts in the play that he helped make presidents. The line is chilling now one of Roy's boys occupies the Oval Office.

While Cohn is the play's evil extreme, his counterpoint is Prior Walter – a 30-year-old WASP who also has AIDS. The pair offer vastly different visions of America and humanity.

Both are subject to visions, Cohn from Ethel Rosenberg – the woman he cynically helped send to the electric chair – and Prior from an angel whose arrival transforms him into a reluctant seer.

Those spectral visions appear from behind sliding doors – often in a blaze of colour or harsh neon – on a platform at the rear of the black stage. Jeremy Allen's set suggests

a reality simultaneously mundane and mystical.

At the heart of the play are two couples in crisis, Prior and his Jewish lover Louis who abandons him, and the closeted Mormon, Joe, and his emotionally abandoned wife, Harper.

There's a symmetry to the two plays as each begins with a meditation from a Janus-like narrator – an elderly rabbi, who looks backwards over America's founding, and an ancient Bolshevik who ponders how the world moves forward.

Despite its grand operatic feel, the play consists largely of duets and trios. Part I unfurls slowly, but takes wing as Joe and Louis meet. Part II opens up visually, as the raised platform allows a dying Cohn to dominate and for Prior's divine confrontation with the assembled angels. The stronger visual interest helps compensate for the fact Perestroika is the less focused play.

Director Dino Dimitriadis's attention to detail helps this ambitious project soar. He has a fine cast including Ben Gerrard as the otherworldly Prior Walter. He is more sombre than wisecracking



Ben Gerrard and Timothy Wardell. Photo: Robert Catto

wit. From his restrained early scenes, he transforms into a life-affirming prophet capable of defying the angels.

As Cohn, Ashley Lyons is magnetically vicious, exerting the deadly charm and fascination of a rattlesnake.

Gus Murray elicits sympathy for Joe. Who would have thought a repressed macho Mormon Republican could be so appealing? Catherine Davis as his Valium-addicted wife, Harper, plays her with wit and strength, rather than as a drug-addled loon.

Timothy Wardell is compelling as the cerebral, fearful Louis while newcomer Joseph Althouse is a revelation as the languid nurse/drag queen Belize, the play's compassionate heart.

There is much doubling, and in their various roles Jude Gibson as the open-hearted Mormon mother and Maggie Dence as a terrifying yet fallible angel are impressive.

The world has turned since the play made its debut. But the questions the old Bolshevik poses are increasingly pressing: Are we doomed? Can we change in time?