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Teze proti Individualismu: Interakce s Druhým v Kushnerově *Andělich v Americe*

A Thesis Against Individualism: Interaction with the Other in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne 16. 8. 2021

Alena Brabencová

Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

Thesis abstract

It is a universally known fact that people do not exist in the world alone. Even though the capitalist system reinforces its isolationist and individualist beliefs, the human functioning in society still depends on our ability to connect, to recognize the Other and on our effort to create meaningful communities with others. Tony Kushner remains thoroughly faithful to his personal anti-individualist theses in his visions of both fictional and real world. Existence in both is seen as wholly relational. Kushner acknowledges this both as a person and as a writer, especially in his essay “With a Little Help from My Friends,” in which he directly comments on the collective nature of his play *Angels in America*. The author emphasizes the power of interaction with his friends during his writing process that created the play.

Similarly, the characters of *Angels in America* interact with others to create and make sense of their destinies in the United States during the Reagan presidency. This thesis explores the different ways in which the characters and the play connect with the world, people around them, and consequently themselves, and how the audience is encouraged to do the same. In other words, the work focuses on the interaction with the Other. The interaction is observed on three levels - the interpersonal, the metaphysical and the metatheatrical level.

The first chapter explains the theoretical differences between individualism and socialism, positions the author in the paradigm and analyzes the interactions of the two main couples in light of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his radical ethics. The second chapter talks about the interactions of the real world and the non-real world and how the individual spirits and the hallucinative spaces they occupy provide distancing effect both for the characters and the audience, which helps them to better understand their immediate personal and social realities. The third chapter shows how the play interacts with the audience through variety of Brechtian devices that promote alienation. The thesis concludes that *Angels in America* calls for change and social progress that can be achieved through community and unity, recognizing the responsibility for our shared future.

Abstrakt práce

Je obecně platné, že lidé neexistují na světě sami. I přesto, že kapitalistický systém propaguje své izolující a individualistické názory, lidské fungování ve společnosti je stále založeno na naší schopnosti propojit se, všimnout si Druhého a na naší pili v tvoreni smysluplných komunit s ostatními. Tony Kushner zůstává věrný svým osobním anti-individualistickým tezím v pohledu jak na fiktivní, tak reálný svět. Existence v obou je vnímána jako zcela založená na vztahování se k ostatním. Kushner toto uznává jako člověk a jako autor, především ve své esejí “S malou pomocí od mých přátel,” ve které přímo mluví o kolektivní povaze své divadelní hry *Andělé v Americe*. Autor zdůrazňuje sílu interakcí se svými přáteli během literárního tvořícího procesu, která nakonec hru vytvořila.

Stejně tak s ostatními interagují postavy *Andělů v Americe*, aby si mohli vytvořit a následně porozumět svým osudům ve Spojených státech amerických v čele s Ronaldem Reaganem. Tato bakalářská práce prozkoumává různé způsoby, jakými se postavy a celá divadelní hra spojuje se světem, s lidmi okolo a v závěru i sami se sebou, a jak je obecnstvo vedeno k podobnému spojení. Jinak řečeno, tato práce se soustředí na interakci s Druhým. Ta je pozorována na třech hlavních rovinách: na interpersonální, metafyzické a metadivadelní.

První kapitola vysvětluje teoretické rozdíly mezi individualismem a socialismem, představuje autorovu pozici a analyzuje interakce dvou hlavních párů ve světle radikální etiky francouzského filozofa Emmanuela Lévinase. Druhá kapitola vypráví o interakcích reálného a nereálného světa a soustředí se na to, jak přízraky a jejich snové světy vytvářejí vzdálenost od děje, která pomáhá postavám a obecnstvu pochopit jejich osobní a sociální realitu. Třetí kapitola ukazuje, jak hra interaguje s obecnstvem skrz Brechtovské divadelní prostředky, které vytváří efekt alienace. Práce dochází k závěru, že *Andělé v Americe* volají po změně a společenském vývoji, kterého můžeme dosáhnout skrz komunitu a pospolitost, všímající si zodpovědnosti za naši sdílenou budoucnost.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Focus on the Other

“*Angels* is a play of ideas made flesh,”¹ writes Rob Weinert-Kendt in a review of the most recent Broadway production, highlighting Kushner’s need for the transparency of the play’s political and ideological background and its relevance in contemporary political climate. Jonathan Freedman describes the play as “a loose baggy monster of a play, housing in its capacious representational tent (inter alia) Brechtian alienation devices, American mythologies, Broadway shtick, kabbalistic folktales, sitcom wisecracks, vaudeville blackout sketches.”² Kushner’s critical leftist theses in the two plays intersect and create an image of the experience of the marginalised communities in America during Reagan’s presidency and what came to be known as AIDS crisis. *Angels in America: Gay Fantasia on National Themes* showcases characters who struggle in their domestic and social realities, trying to find what beliefs and ideas really matter to them from what the world around them offers, characters who strive to create better futures for themselves and each other.

They are not allowed the space to do this alone in their singular realities; on the contrary, at the core of *Angels* is the recognition of the fact that people do not exist alone in the universe. The only way of creating progress and of moving towards a better future seems to lie in perceiving the multiplicity of human experience, in learning through community and in relating to others in their fates and journeys. In terms of the scholarship on Kushner, the importance of the transformational aspect of these connections had been previously noted by scholars such as Stephen F. Kruger³ and

¹ Rob Weinert-Kendt, “‘*Angels in America*’ takes flight in a new political age,” *America Magazine* 218, no. 10 (April 30, 2018): 57. EBSCO.

² Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 42.

³ Stephen F. Kruger, “Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Stephen F. Kruger (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 151-169.

Ranen Omer-Sherman⁴ in their work on the Other and this thesis wishes to analyse the different types of interaction with the Other more closely. In this work I aim to explore the concept of the Other and evaluate how it pushes the plots and the individual characters forward in their paths, closer to their brighter and changed futures. The interaction with the Other will be explored on three levels: the interpersonal interactions that happen on stage between the characters, the interaction of the real world and the hallucinative dream world and the metatheatrical interactions of the play with the audience.

The characters are forced into a group project of creating progress and a possibility of change in the world. At the beginning of the play, they are fairly sheltered from the others, knowing little of each other's worlds and ideas – Louis is in an apparently comfortable union with Prior, Harper and Joe allow themselves to exist in a self-imposed bubble of Mormonism despite Joe's career and repressed sexual orientation, and Roy Cohn, who is confident of his own worldview thanks to his social position and clout, rejects all others. Throughout both parts of the play, these isolating individualistic attitudes are undermined by unexpected powers of the world such as death, passion, life, love – forces which by their essence unite us and connect us to others. Under the influence of these, the characters are forced into situations and circumstances where they need to confront the Other, challenge their beliefs about the world and strip themselves of the security it provides. To understand the true nature of progress and change, the characters (and the audience) need to understand the importance of relating to one another which is done through various encounters on the aforementioned three levels. In the remaining part of this section, I will explain how this need for the other is created and how it corresponds to the philosophical and linguistic background of the play.

Ranen Omer-Sherman provides valuable insight into the intricacies of creating connections between characters, and learning from them: “The audience closely follows a web of characters,

⁴ Ranen Omer-Sherman, “The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” *MELUS* 32, no.2 (Summer, 2007): 7-30. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30029722>.

men and women, gay and homosexual, whose ambivalent relation to those that depend on them are revealed in troubling flights from, and journeys toward, the true meaning of responsibility and community.”⁵ The metaphor of “web” alludes to the multiplicity and complexity of the connections created in the text – many are unexpected, some come from different worlds and different realities which corresponds to the levels on which the connections will be analysed. The two mentioned abstract concepts (community and responsibility) are central to my argument, especially in their implications regarding connecting to others.

What Kushner delivers on stage is a process of creating a community: characters finding ways to relate to each other through their differences and similarities, confronting their fears and the unknown, learning to overcome them and growing through those interactions. This is demonstrated in the last scene of *Perestroika* which had been called “a utopian closure in which outcast blacks, Jews, Mormons, and gays learn to come to terms with the messy reality of human existence.”⁶ The characters who discovered the true meaning of community, exemplifying Kushner’s anti-individualist theses, meet near the Bethesda fountain. Prior and Louis are not reunited as lovers but are determined to go forward as friends. Hannah, the Mormon mother, had her entire frame of mind transformed through the interactions in the play and had become a part of worlds she did not know of in the beginning. Her metaphorical journey is overtly signified by the difference in her haircut which had been suggested by Prior when they first met. Belize connects the group together with his devoted nature to the community, responsibility, and sacrifice. Together in their changed selves they meet in what David Savran aptly calls “a new definition of family.”⁷

The concept of redefined family is derived not only from Kushner’s anti-capitalist attitudes, his involvement in the post-Stonewall ACT UP queer activist communities, or the New York LGBT+ ball culture, it is also connected to the communal sense of belonging embedded in Jewish

⁵ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 8.

⁶ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 24.

⁷ David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 245.

culture and its literary tradition. As explained by Stephen Wade: “The Jews are a Mediterranean people and have the same expressive and emotive need to tell stories as is found in Greek and Italian traditions. But they also have that basis of biblical text, of parable, and a view of narrative as central to an understanding of communal definition and purpose.”⁸ The emphasis is on community as a meaningful vessel for moving forward and creating a meaningful past narrative and a better future. This is additionally directly proclaimed in very first scene when the Rabbi says: “We assemble that we may mourn *collectively* this good and righteous woman.”⁹ Already in the first scene it is foreshadowed that the play will be a manifesto for the transcendental forces that constitute the anti-individualistic attitudes and connect us as a result, reinforcing the sense of multiplicity of interacting realities.

The idea of community is closely related to the idea of responsibility: when we accept that we are a part of community and communal consciousness, we also accept the accountability we need to have towards others and from it we derive our responsibilities. In other words, the concept of responsibility expresses how we define ourselves through our acts towards others. As noted by Omer-Sherman, this is etymologically grounded in the Hebrew word for responsibility “achraiut” and its root “acher,” which means “other,” *someone who is not me*.¹⁰ He connects the notion to the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and his radical ethics. Nicolas Ridout also comments on the Levinasian relational ethics: “Levinas proposes that we ought to live eternally in relation to the ‘other.’ The ground of our human existence lies in our encounter with the fact that ‘other’ exists, an encounter in which we ought to recognise an infinite obligation toward that ‘other.’”¹¹ Additionally, the root “acher” can be traced to the Aramaic word אחר (achar) which according to

⁸ Stephen Wade, *Jewish-American Writing since 1945: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 95.

⁹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Parts One and Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017): 10. The cursive is my own. All subsequent citations from this edition will be implied by parentheses in the text.

¹⁰ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 12.

¹¹ Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre and Ethics* (Hampshire: Palgrave and Macmillian, 2009): 52.

the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* can be translated as “after.”¹² This suggests an etymological connection of the concepts of community, responsibility and future which is relevant to *Angels*: it presents the idea that through relating to the Other and our actions we are responsible for creating a better future, for the acceleration of the true historical progress and for change.

Frances Berenson stresses the importance of the Other and community in the philosophy of Hegel, whose thought also illuminates the centre of Louis’s philosophical persuasions, as follows:

I cannot examine the single self and reach any important conclusions because I do not exist in isolation from other selves, and my introspection must of necessity be based on an examination of my relationships with others. Hegel can be taken...to be drawing attention to the importance others play in any serious understanding and knowledge of self.¹³

What can be understood from this is that in a Hegelian light, interaction with the Other, *someone who is not me*, becomes central in the process of recognizing our own self-consciousness and the world that we live in because it allows us to examine ourselves as objects. From this we can infer where the need for the Other is born. We relate to others in order to understand our own selves and the world around us. In *Angels*, the characters are surely portrayed embarking on journeys of serious understanding of self and the universality of the human experience through how they relate to their ideas about themselves and how they act upon the responsibilities towards others. In a reciprocal fashion, the audience is forced to embark on a similar journey by the act of watching these journeys unfold.

1.2 The Different Instances of the Other

The necessary considerations of the Other are emphasized both in *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. While the former is more naturalistic and realistic in its portrayal of the world of New York, the latter becomes more fantastical and supernatural. Kushner had commented on the stark contrast in the two dichotomic plays: “Perhaps it can be said that *Millennium* is a play about

¹² “achar,” *Bible Tools*, last accessed August 4, 2021, <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/H311/achar.html>.

¹³ Frances Berenson, “Hegel on Others and the Self,” *Philosophy* 57, no.219 (January, 1982): 77. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4619540>.

security and certainty being blown apart, while *Perestroika* is about danger and possibility following the explosion...A membrane has broken; there is disarray and debris.”¹⁴ The first part introduces the characters and their individual motivations, positions and histories, their intermingling and intertwining, which are then reconstructed in the second part. In other words, in the former, the traditional American hierarchies and individualist attitudes are rejected and dismantled while in the latter they are transformed in the new family-like community.

The most obvious interactions with the Other take place on an interpersonal level – between the characters on stage as they establish their starting positions, contexts and attitudes. However, the internal experiences of the characters are additionally externalized in the forms of hallucinations, dreams, and spectres, through which they also uncover parts of their identities and lives they were previously not able to reflect on without the effect of distance. This kind of interaction of the real world and the hallucinative world offers a useful mirror for the internal happenings: for example, Harper in her hallucinations discovers a space in which she can express herself and her needs, through which she is able to interact with herself. Additionally, there is an overlap of the interpersonal interactions and the spirit realm as some of the pivotal interpersonal scenes take place in an imagined dimension. For example, it is in the shared hallucination when Prior tells Harper that her husband is gay, it is in pain-induced dreaming with the ancestors when Prior is allowed to reunite with Louis and engage in painless romantic moment, unsullied by his disease. In *Perestroika*, the focus is shifted to the interaction with the spirit world and Heaven and functions more as a reflection on how we as society redefine ourselves when faced with history and danger, rather than describing the processes of individual human beings. This is echoed in the modes of narration of the two parts: *Millennium Approaches* takes from the poetic realism of Tennessee Williams and the raw naturalism of Eugene O’Neill, focusing on the interpersonal interactions, human limitations and personal tragedies, while the fantastical *Perestroika* is in tone more

¹⁴ Tony Kushner, “A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging,” in *Angels in America* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017): 311.

influenced by traditional Jewish mysticism, providing the distancing effect for the audience who are similarly to the characters in the first part able to reflect on their own realities and theories they arrived in the theatre with. Besides the Levinasian personal Other and the distancing spiritual Other, we can also consider the metatheatrical real-world Other. The interaction with the audience is necessary for the didactical part of the play that advocates the various anti-individualist theses. A variety of Brechtian devices that break the fourth wall between the stage and the audience are employed to raise awareness of the social and political issues and through this kind of alienation, the audience is persuaded to approach them more critically.

1.3 The Structure of the Thesis

In the first chapter, I will explore the notions of individualism and anti-individualism, their political implications in the context of the American political environment and the author's personal persuasions. The important pairings of the play and their interactions will be considered in relation to Emmanuel Levinas' radical ethics. The pairs on which the responsibilities and their negation will be explored are Prior and Louis and Harper and Joe. A separate subchapter will be dedicated to Roy Cohn and Belize as their characters represent more abstract polar positions regarding radical individualism and radical anti-individualism. The second chapter will discuss the distancing effect the Spirit World provides and its manifestations on a personal and a social level. The analysed visions include the pivotal dreams and hallucinations, Harper and Prior's interactions that take place in these spaces, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg who decides to haunt Roy because of his selfishness, and the Angel and her Epistle. These will be discussed in the light of Walter Benjamin's mysticism and his Angelus Novus. The third chapter will examine the figure of Bertolt Brecht as an influence on the author and the devices of the Epic Theatre employed in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. Furthermore, it will be illustrated how actors and directors involved in different productions relate to their audiences and the physical representation of that relationship with the world on stage.

Chapter 2 – Levinas’s Other: Interpersonal Interactions and Their Ethical Implications

2.1 Individualism, Socialism and Radical Ethics of the Other

It can generally be stated that people do not live alone in the world – one cannot exist in vacuum, isolated from other people. However, the Western capitalist system is founded in the belief that we can only assert ourselves as individuals who fend for themselves, who can create their identities in isolation, without creating meaningful connections with their environment. Critics have described capitalism as “a system of creative destruction – destructive of social bonds, faiths, communities, traditions.”¹⁵ Additionally, Todd Gitlin talks specifically about the attitudes in the US of the nineties: “American individualism today takes the form, primarily, of negation. It is a sour individualism that masks conformity...It knows whom or what it hates better than it knows what kind of world it wants.”¹⁶ Kushner pointed out in an interview how this is illustrated in politics: “There is a great political divide between people who believe human beings are unseverably connected through community and those who believe we make our destinies alone.”¹⁷ He himself remains connected to the importance of communities in his work and life, stating that he’s never been a person who had “fantasies about absolute self-reliance.”¹⁸ The idea of community as an antidote to the individualistic politics is manifested not only in the plot of *Angels* in the final reuniting of the members of different marginalized groups at the Bethesda fountain, but also in Kushner’s writing process. Kushner captures this notion best in his essay called “With a Little Help from My Friends.” The author recalls and describes the different people that contributed to his work, most notably Kimberly T. Flynn and Oskar Eustis. He concludes the essay with the following meditation:

¹⁵ Todd Gitlin, “After the Failed Faiths: Beyond Individualism, Marxism and Multiculturalism,” *World Policy Journal* 12, no.1 (Spring, 1995): 63. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40209399>.

¹⁶ Gitlin, “After the Failed Faiths,” 63.

¹⁷ Tony Kushner, “Tony Kushner: ‘To love someone puts you at the risk of loss,’” interview by Kate Kellaway, *The Guardian*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/14/tony-kushner-interview-angels-in-america-to-love-someone-recognise-life-not-eternal-national-theatre>.

¹⁸ Kushner, “To love someone puts you at the risk of loss,” interview.

I have been blessed with remarkable comrades and collaborators. Together we organize the world for ourselves...we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery...Marx was right: The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. And also plays.¹⁹

“In Vitro,” Act Two of *Millennium Approaches*, shows the characters slowly detaching from their partners and their natural environments. The name of the Act itself refers to a scientific method that according to *Oxford English Dictionary* puts organisms “under artificial conditions, outside a living body,”²⁰ which to an extent mirrors living under Reagan as experienced by the marginalised and overlooked characters of the play. The values reinforced by both the Republican politics of Reagan and the capitalist mode of existing create individuals whom Louis describes as “Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan’s children.” (77) Kushner had challenged these individualist discourses that remain relevant to the myth of the American Dream after reading Raymond Williams’ 1985 socialist essay “Walking Backwards into the Future,” which led him to examine a concept of reformed community and society grounded in “a progressive, humanist doctrine”²¹ in *Angels*, as noted by James Fisher. Williams explains the concept of socialism more in depth, one that can be found in *Angels*, socialism focused on the Other and the relational aspect of our existence,

The first uses of socialist, as a way of thinking, were in deliberate contrast to the meanings of individualist: both as a challenge to that other way of thinking, in which all human behaviour was reduced to matters of individual character and more sharply as a challenge to its versions of human intentions. Was life an arena in which individuals should strive to improve their own conditions, or was it a network of human relationships in which people found everything of value in and through each other?²²

¹⁹ Tony Kushner, “With a Little Help from My Friends,” in *Angels in America* (London, Nick Hern Books: 2017), 333.

²⁰ “in, prep.2,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, last modified March 2021, last accessed April 20, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/92971?redirectedFrom=in+vitro.

²¹ James Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2008) 39.

²² Raymond Williams, “Walking Backwards Into the Future,” in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gale (London and New York: Verso, 1989): 283.

Kushner, a fierce defender of the latter, answers this question in *Angels* through portraying the interpersonal interactions as deeply transformative and consequential. As we do not live alone, we need to recognise that our actions and choices do not only impact our lives but transform and influence those of the others. Additionally, identities of everyone involved are impacted by those relations which had been explored by Stephen Kruger in “Identity and Conversion in Angels in America”: “The complexity of identity in Angels in America also arises from Kushner’s conception of it as social and relational: one is not oneself in isolation but only in contrast to, in solidarity and negotiation with a variety of other selves.”²³ The different behaviours and attitudes we take towards others could be defined as our personal ethics. For Emmanuel Levinas, ethics constitutes first philosophy: we could say that it precedes our own Being and it is fundamental to our existence. Ridout emphasizes the main idea of Levinas’s thought, aiming his attention at the shift from the individual self to the social self: “Modern philosophy replaced God with the self. Levinas would replace the self with the other.”²⁴ What is this Other in the context of Levinasian terminology and philosophy? In *Time and the Other* he states,

...the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity. The other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the widow and the orphan’, whereas I am the rich and the powerful.²⁵

When we recognize that we are not alone and turn from the Self, we must also recognize the Other and listen to their pleas and needs. In fact, we are confronted with the Face of the Other even prior to our realizations simply due to living in a society. According to Michael L. Morgan,

We are responsible for all others, all the time, in every way. This extreme formulation says more than that we ought to care about others; it says that our obligations to them always override any other interest or value we have and that no

²³ Kruger, “Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*,” 154.

²⁴ Ridout, *Theatre and Ethics*, 53.

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Time and the Other” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989): 54.

matter how much we give or share with others, there is always more that we can and should do.²⁶

We are responsible for doing good selfless deeds the others demand of us, ones that are not defined by systems or politics. The plea, or the imperative, is constituted by the Face, the expression of the Other's need, in its full vulnerability and nakedness, recognizing the possibility of death. The imperative is revealed to us in an epiphany of the Face, opening us up to what we need to do and what we must not do: abandon the Other, leave him to die alone and consequently murder him. In a 1981 interview with Bernhard Casper, Levinas had talked about how without the opportunity to leave those fundamental responsibilities and abandon the Other, one finds himself in a hostage situation and that "to be a hostage may simply be an indication of love."²⁷ How we respond in the face-to-face encounter defines our character. Simon Critchley noted that "the worst that might happen [is] the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the other,"²⁸ and while I agree with that, it should also be added that when we disregard the other's needs, we are also betraying the most humane and vulnerable parts of ourselves. Waldenfels describes this in similar terms: "We are living in the face of the other, seeking or fleeing it, running the risk of losing our own face."²⁹ In this chapter, the interpersonal interactions will be dissected in light of Levinas' radical ethics that are directly related to Kushner's anti-individualist theses. In the first two subchapters, I will show how the two main couples deal with responsibilities and how their negations influence them. The last subchapter focuses on Roy and Belize as they represent the polar opposites in how they approach responsibility, individualism and community.

²⁶ Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 11.

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Být pro druhého*, trans. Jan Sokol (Praha: Zvon, 1997): 20. My own translation.

²⁸ Simon Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 13.

²⁹ Bernhard Waldenfels, "Levinas and the face of the other," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 65.

2.3 Louis and Prior

While all characters undergo transformative journey, it could be argued that the relationship between Louis and Prior is the most central to the developments of the play. The character of Louis is Kushner's persona for exploring his own intersecting identities (such as American, Jewish, queer) and the ambiguity of leftist politics in America. Louis is both a metaphorical and a literal "word processor" (1) who imagines living in a perfectible Hegelian world while also denying that very idea through his own actions and failings. In the stage directions, Prior is introduced as "Louis's boyfriend" (1) before we are told anything else about him which foreshadows his dependency, his otherness and need. Prior's vulnerability is revealed in Scene Four of Act One (aptly called "Bad News"). This scene is pivotal because it represents an epiphany of the Face as Prior expresses his fears and declining sense of security and also foreshadows the future attitudes regarding responsibility of both parties. Prior is both literally and metaphorically faced with the possibility (and inevitability) of death, internally and externally – his body is covered in lesions, and he had just left the funeral home where Louis's grandmother had been buried. He covers this possibility in humour when he talks about the rabbi and introduces a possibility of his own funeral: "A definite find. Get his number when you go to the graveyard. I want him to bury me." (19) Louis reveals that he never visited his grandma when she was ill which hints at the weakness of his ethical persuasions and undermines the value of his future responses about coming home and being there for Prior. When Prior sighs, "Le chat, elle ne reviendra jamais, jamais..." (21), he may also be referring to Louis, sensing his limitations and possible impossibility of physical and mental support in illness and in death on his part. The intensity of Prior's vulnerable imperative is revealed when he tells Louis that he feared being abandoned. The short "Oh." epitomizes the moment of epiphany when the two lovers entangle in a stalemate hostage situation. It is the determining moment that tells us what direction their relationship is going to take and that reinforces our previous conclusions about

Louis based on the treatment of his grandmother. Morgan describes the face-to-face encounter as following,

...being faced with another person's pain and misery and realizing how one must respond to it, out of a sense of obligation, a kind of indebtedness, a sense that one cannot avoid acknowledging that misery, that one must care about it, not ignore it, and hence that one must do something.³⁰

For Louis it is however easier to stay isolated in his own reality and thus it is not surprising that his response mirrors Prior's doubts and fears: "I have to go bury my grandma." (22) The promise that he will come home is undermined by the fact that at this moment of great need he is leaving to bury a relative he did not care for during her lifetime.

The following scenes in *Millennium Approaches* reinforce and partially explain limitations of Louis's character. Even though he recognizes the needs of his partner, he refuses to give up his idea about how his self-centred world should look. His individualist Hegelian belief in the notion of perfectibility and progress imprison him in the narrowness of his mind and make him overlook the effect of the Face. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* comments on the limitations exposed when the Face is not seen: "We carry on, in our respective spheres, apparently motivated by desires and projects, some of which entail the kind of quests for mastery and recognition that Hegel described."³¹ Indeed, integrating Prior's weakness would mean becoming weak, it would mean being confronted with death, conforming to someone else's needs and thus disrupting "this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something." (25) While we may judge Louis for his shortcomings as a person, it should also be recognised that to an extent he is a characterization of the everyday and everyman. However, in the context of Levinas' philosophy he violates the rules of love, he does not hold himself hostage and accountable. The desire to be characterized not by the shortcomings but by his complexity as a human is explained in Scene 8 in which Louis argues that Judaism considers act of judgment mostly

³⁰ Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 20.

³¹ Bettina Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/>.

in theory, pondering over the categories of human behaviour, without executing the morals he praises – this works well for Louis because he likes to think of himself as a whole, defined not by individual events but the immensity of his lifetime and existence, the intensity of his theoretical beliefs. To this Prior replies: “I like your cosmology, baby. While time is running out I find myself drawn to anything that’s suspended, that lacks an ending. But it seems to me that it lets you off scot-free...No judgment, no guilt or responsibility.” (43) Prior recognizes that Louis, like the seafarers on La Grande Geste (here we are reminded of Belize’s assessment of Louis: “big ideas are all you love” (230)), would metaphorically be able to throw him into the deep dark sea. Nonetheless, he is wrong in presuming that Louis would not feel guilt over his actions. After all, as the Rabbi whom Louis visits asserts, “Jews believe in guilt.” (25)

In fact, his consequent actions are fuelled by the act of leaving and the subsequent shame that is caused by his inability to live up to his moral ideals. Morgan comments on humans acting as “self-interpreting animals:”³² “To feel shame one must have an understanding of an ideal that one holds to and a grasp of oneself as failing to fulfil that ideal; moreover, one realizes that the other person is aware of one’s failure.”³³ Just before leaving Prior in the hospital, Louis in a dialogue with the nurse shows self-disgust (“So what the fuck is the matter with me?”(54)) – caused by his own detachment – and empathy towards the Other. This decision sets Louis on a self-destructive journey fuelled by guilt and a need to punish himself for the apparently selfish need to protect himself. Not responding to the Other and supporting the interests of the self correspond to the discussion in the first subchapter: in *Angels*, individualism is accompanied by desire for punishment and ghosts of one’s own conscience. As Savran neatly puts it, “subjectivity is produced by a masochistic desire for suffering. The self, wracked by guilt and remorse, eternally analyzing itself and finding itself wanting, seeks out the pain that it believes to be retribution for real or imagine sins.”³⁴ Another formulation of this had been offered by Fisher: “Having abandoned Prior, and at the same time his

³² Michael M. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 94.

³³ Michael M. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 94.

³⁴ David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man*, 247.

own sense of right and wrong, Louis is in profound emotional agony over his faithlessness. Filled with remorse, he chooses a consciously self-destructive path.”³⁵ This is demonstrated in the very next scene in which Louis engages in an unsafe sexual encounter with a stranger – he wants to be hurt, punished, eventually even infected. Where is this shame coming from, and why would he reinforce it? I believe that at the core of the problem is his inability to balance theory and practice (which alludes to Prelapsarianov’s monologue in *Perestroika*). He shares this with Joe in Act 2: “Nowadays. No connections. No responsibilities. All of us...falling through the cracks that separate what we owe to our selves and...and what we owe to love.” (74) From this, we can draw parallels between Louis’s personal and political inconsistencies. He not only fails to live up to his standard in terms of social relations, but also in what he believes about society and how people should live. What Kushner identifies is the failure of political theory to motivate our own personal actions which is similar to how Morgan describes Levinas’ relationship with politics,

Levinas makes a multiple assessment, that Europe has suffered a spiritual crisis, that it involves the failure of socialism or Marxism and the spiralling of socialism into totalitarian violence and atrocity... Politics must give way to something else, to “ethics without ethical system” or individual, discrete acts of goodness.³⁶

Corby comments on the parallel with the political in *Angels* as following,

Louis’s great internal contradiction and the source of his bountiful sense of guilt is the fact that he too, in extremis, resorts to just such a position of self-interest, readily adopting the discourse of liberal humanism to serve his own ends.³⁷

What he is saying here is that when Louis reaches his personal limits, he succumbs to positions he despises (partner who abandons, being politically liberal) and in consequence needs to punish himself for his actions. We can even draw parallels with Roy Cohn who refuses to accept responsibility for others and his own deeds as Omer-Sherman pointed out,

Angels unsparingly exhibits the failure of abstract ideology. Louis’s failure of responsibility is therefore as heinous as Roy Cohn’s betrayal of Ethel Rosenberg...In both betrayals Kushner wants us to recognize disturbing symptoms of the larger

³⁵ Jame Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 72.

³⁶ Michael M. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 24.

³⁷ James Corby, “The Audacity of Hope: Locating Kushner’s Political Vision in *Angels in America*,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47, no.1 (November 14, 2010): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqq069>.

culture's inauthentic response to suffering, calling on us to replace indifference with the traditional principle of compassion.³⁸

To reiterate, I would argue that Louis wants to be punished as a result of his actions that manifest the opposite of his theoretical beliefs: the indifference, abandonment, overlooking of the Face, the betrayal of the community. The personal and political contradictions intersect in his relationship with Joe – by engaging in the pursuit of the young closeted Republican, Louis betrays his ideals regarding both love and politics. He is not in love with Joe and his politics, and he even doubts his own ability to love in *Perestroika* when he says: “It takes years to...feel like that, love, love, ohmygod, love, if there even is such a thing as, as –...” (204) Louis's ambivalent relationship to love is revealed in the penultimate scene of Act 2. Both couples finalize the initiation of the change they will have to face in *Perestroika*. Louis says that he had already left and Prior points out his inability to balance theory and practice and with it the betrayal of the Levinasian ethical principles: “A person could theoretically love and maybe many do but we both know now you can't.” (82) The use of the adverb “now” suggests that this had been revealed only during the course of the events of *Millennium* and while Louis forces himself to use “I love you, Prior.” (82) as a signifier for his good will, it is once again being emptied out by his actions of the very moment.

Prior's otherness is defined by his illness. He does embody the position that for Levinas is the orphan, the weak, the poor. Susan Sontag writes in *AIDS and its Metaphors* that “etymologically, patient means sufferer. It is not suffering as such that is most deeply feared but suffering that degrades.”³⁹ Prior encounters the uncertainty of this suffering even more intensely after Louis displays first signs of his fleeting nature. However, it is important to note that at its core, *Angels* remains a hopeful play that emphasizes the goodness of the community and therefore even though Prior is rejected by the Other he desires, there are Others that will take care of him, care for him. He is not alone in the world when he feels most alone. Partially, he finds some comfort in the mutual hallucination with Harper (and arguably during the other spectral encounters with the Angel, his

³⁸ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 11.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 123.

ancestors and Louis) who recognises his need (which will be more closely analysed in the next chapter) but feels tremendously alone after hearing the Angel: “Poor me. Poor poor me. Why me? Why poor poor me? I don’t feel good right now. I really don’t.” (35) Corby had called him “a rather Beckettian figure: he must go on, he can’t go on, he’ll go on.”⁴⁰ Significantly, the person who takes on responsibility for Prior is Belize in *Millennium Approaches* and then also Hannah in *Perestroika*. Belize cradles Prior, offers him cream and hears him out without reducing him to his condition, phones with him when he needs, accompanies him to funerals, confronts the idea of death with him and obtains the pills necessary for a recovery. The reassurance he provides (“Whatever happens, baby, I will be here for you.” (65)) is something that should have primarily come from Louis who was bound to Prior by romantic love but was missing in how Louis approaches the world. To emphasize this contrast, Belize challenges Louis at multiple occasions and like a mirror points out his inconsistencies, his inability to live up to what is required of him. Even Hannah, who has no romantic or platonic relations to Prior and comes from a background which did not primarily provide her with the gift of queer tolerance, is able to overcome her initial reservations and when faced with the Other at a moment of vulnerability, she takes Prior to the hospital, stays there and shares a vision of the Angel visiting with him which grants her a place at the Angel of Bethesda. Prior is aware of Hannah’s help and even thanks her and says that she saved his life. It is important to emphasize that neither Belize nor Hannah act out of self-interest, they do not expect to be appreciated or given something back, they do it because they feel obliged and want to listen to others, help them. *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy* states that “Levinas names this responsiveness Platonically the ‘Good beyond being’. We perform that good, that trace of the infinite, because instances of answering to or for another are everyday events...”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Corby, “The Audacity of Hope,” 29.

⁴¹ Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/>>.

After Louis distances himself from a reality that he cannot handle and gets the desired punishment and comfort from Joe's company, he decides that he wants to see Prior. Kruger puts it followingly,

Louis and Joe each move out of "marriages" and into a new relationship with each other, a movement that, for both, entails a radical rethinking of the self. Louis is forced to consider whether he is capable of truly loving; when he decides that he is and tries to return to Prior, he finds that he "can't come back" (2:143), that the relation to Prior is now essentially changed.⁴²

The way Louis describes it ("It's like a, a bubble rising through rocks" (205)) suggests that he had been suppressing the feelings of responsibility that had been present which aligns with Levinas' ideas about ethics being before Being, about ethics as first philosophy. Through the metaphor it is also implied that he needed to become stronger before engaging with the crisis. Scene Two of Act Four in *Perestroika* marks the reuniting of the two partners after they had both undergone significant changes, being involved in different life situations. In his righteous anger, Prior passively-aggressively attacks Louis who finally "tries to be reasonable." (217) The description of the Other in the context of Levinas' philosophy corresponds to how Louis describes his ex-lover (with the exception that he perceives it as negative while Levinas perceives it as wholly universal and therefore as neither positive nor negative): "just too much of a victim, finally. Passive. Dependent." (218) He refused the Other's need and instead decided to focus on his own. Louis provided himself with companionship in order to avoid the loneliness he would have to face if Prior passively depended on him. The betrayal of the hostage situation of love proves his selfishness. How does Prior deal with being abandoned? He lets other people hear him and help him, he turns to the community rather than the domestic union to help him with his recovery. Similarly to Harper, in Heaven he understands that historical progress is fuelled by loss, that we have to overcome it in order to move forward: "To face loss. With grace. Is key, I think, but it's impossible. All you ever do is lose and lose." (263) This aligns with Kushner's philosophy as described by Fisher: "Kushner

⁴² Kruger, "Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*," 156.

believes that ‘you can’t conquer loss. You lose. To suggest otherwise would be to suggest a fantasy...Life is about losing. Things are taken from you. People are taken from you. You just have to face it.’⁴³ It is what Harper describes as “painful progress,” (285) something we need to come to terms with in order to create a better future for ourselves. The finality of the loss is reached when Prior tells Louis that he cannot ever come back – it is a signifier of moving forward, away from the illness and loneliness, towards more life, more hope. Levinas writes: “The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future.”⁴⁴ I think that the transformation of their relationship means transforming how they relate to the future and to themselves: by refusing Louis (an embodiment of ambivalent individualism and focusing on one’s own needs rather than needs of the other and of society) to come back and focusing on the community that eventually gathers at Bethesda, Prior allows himself to welcome a future that will feel more hopeful and less alone.

2.4 Harper and Joe

While their starting points are different, there are many similarities between the dynamics of the two main couples. Just like Prior, Harper is in the stage directions described as Joe’s wife before anything else which foregrounds her dependency on his character and signifies her otherness. She is in a position of the sufferer not only because of her addiction and anxiety but also because of her traumatic past which includes an abusive family home, alcoholism, and a miscarriage, as we find out from Scene Four of Act One of *Millennium Approaches*. Joe is, like Louis, only referred to in terms of his profession in the stage directions. While the stage directions imply similar connection between the couples, there is one important difference: there is not a specific epiphany of the Face in Joe and Harper’s relationship as it is portrayed in *Angels*. The very nature of that relationship predetermines the overlooking of the Other’s face and their need, it is not only circumstantial,

⁴³James Fisher, “Tony Kushner’s Metaphorical Jew,” in ‘*You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 83. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj1r1.10>.

⁴⁴ Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 44.

catalysed by a specific external situation like realization of an illness: Joe cannot by the nature of his sexual identity hear out Harper's pleas for his romantic love, for the truth, or the subsequent possibility of freedom. At the beginning of the play, she had spent a significant amount of time in the loneliness Prior yet has to experience, come to terms with and overcome. She is paralysed by Joe's inability to listen to both his and her needs and she remains completely ignored in his physical reality. When she is first introduced in Scene Three, the stage directions tell us that she is "at home, alone, as she often is." (16) However, in her loneliness, she is endowed with great observational skills, imagination and sensitivity to social and personal injustice, she can access the "threshold of revelation" and she frames the narrative of the play with her remarks regarding the ozone layer. Fisher writes that this is "an appealing quality"⁴⁵ and notes the importance of imagination for Kushner: "Imagination is the true source of revelation for Kushner, particularly an imagination informed by an exposure to the workings of history, and the ways in which history has been understood, distorted, and manipulated over the centuries."⁴⁶ I agree with this and would say that by endowing Harper with the gift of imagination, Kushner once again proves that being betrayed by one Other does not mean that we remain alone in the world, that we do not have the possibility of connection and have to succumb to individualist positions. On the other hand, she is able to find the feeling of community and companionship precisely in her fantasies. I will talk more about the function of her hallucinations in the next chapter but they do manifest the strength she finds in her loneliness, the community function as her support network. In her interaction with Mr. Lies, it is revealed that she lives in a state of paralysis she wishes to escape from when she says: "...maybe Joe loves me and I'm only crazy thinking otherwise, or maybe not, maybe it's even worse than I know, maybe...I want to know, maybe I don't. The suspense, Mr. Lies, it's killing me." (18) She hopes for the truth whilst being scared for the loss that comes with it, her plead towards Joe is to let her go, to set her free, to not prolong the state of loneliness and paralysis, by telling her the truth.

⁴⁵ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 63.

⁴⁶ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 5.

Joe denies her completely at the end of the scene, saying: “Nothing to be anxious about.” (18) By invalidating her experience, he pushes her further into despair and prolongs her suffering, overlooking her Face and denying the responsibility that he has for her needs, keeping her in a state of “pretend-happy.” (23)

When Prior confirms her fears and suspicions about Joe being gay, she goes into denial at first, but then understands the loss that it entails and is thrown into a state of despair. Scene 8 of Act One epitomizes their first honest face-to-face encounter: in her nakedness, Harper gives Joe an opportunity to come clean, to let the transformation begin: “Then tell me, please. And we’ll see.” (38) Joe denies this opportunity and with that embarks upon a similar journey of guilt as Louis. Even though Joe recognizes his responsibility for Harper, as revealed in their conversation with Roy, he also at the same time recognizes his need to explore the repressed desires. By choosing to explore them when still in a relationship with Harper, he refutes the Levinasian responsibility and similarly to Louis violates the contract of love and the rules that come with it. In short, he also abandons her. Often, the stage directions describe their relationship more accurately than the actual dialogue (mostly dominated by Joe and his self-denial) – an example of this is Scene Two of “In Vitro.” The stage directions tell us: “Night. Harper at home, sitting on the floor, all alone, with no lights on. We can barely see her. Joe enters, but he doesn’t turn on the lights.” (51) This is because metaphorically, he does not see her either and she knows this and does not want to be vulnerable in front of him, she sees him as a threat, as “a man with a knife.” (83) When he does switch on the light, “as soon as he sits, Harper stands, goes to the lamp, turns off the light, and then returns to sit beside him. They sit quietly, close together, in the dark.” (51) Refusing to shed the light on their falling-apart union is done in a perfectly mechanical fashion, without words. It is a habit they had formed together, one that had been reinforced by Joe not telling the truth. It is also a metaphor for them never talking about what needs to be addressed, about being in the dark about each other’s realities and identities.

Scene Nine of “In Vitro” is the most important one as it portrays the beginning of the transformations the couples have to undergo. The scene also foreshadows the unavoidable loss caused by the dynamic of the two couples and the ambivalent attitudes towards responsibility of Louis and Joe. Fisher writes of the scene: “The overlapping dialogue underscores the fact that the problem in each case is the same – each couple has one partner in serious need and another partner who cannot, or will not, respond.”⁴⁷ Like Louis, Harper leaves because she is overwhelmed by the truth and needs a safe place to process it. She recognizes the threat Joe poses now to her immediate well-being and while in the long-term she welcomes his honesty (because the loss sets her free), she cannot find ways to make sense of her momentary reality. Joe is abandoned which already foreshadows the final reversal of their roles. When they are reunited in *Perestroika*, Joe finds her in a delirious state and takes her home, at least partially fulfilling his role as a caretaker, recognizing his obligation towards the poor, the suffering. The process of transformation is finalized when they engage in their last sexual encounter – in the short scene, Joe tells Harper that he sees nothing when he looks at her. This is the moment when he hears out her plea, when he understands what she needs. She knows this too when she says: “Finally. The truth...It sets you free. Good-bye.” For Harper, this is closure and a new beginning of her individualization. As stated by Andrea Most, “as soon as Joe reveals his true identity to her, she is freed to be herself as well.”⁴⁸

The last two scenes of *Perestroika* before the Epilogue are dedicated to this individualization and give us a glimpse of what life will look like and of how people move forward, away from loss. Betraying our responsibilities for others comes with a price, is what Kushner tells here. Our individualism does not reward us with the same fruits that being devoted to community does – this is emphasized by Joe not being included in the Bethesda union. I align with Kruger’s comments about the reversal of the relationship dynamic,

⁴⁷ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 71.

⁴⁸ Andrea Most, *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 234.

She is leaving him, having slapped him as he has just beaten Louis. He, not she, is now the one in need of psychological support that is not forthcoming, and, as she leaves, Harper transfers to Joe the Valium she herself once used in substitution for his missing support (2:143). As (a fantasized) Harper earlier suggests to Joe, “You’re turning into me” (2:40).⁴⁹

Who is Harper turning into? In a reciprocal fashion, she abandons Joe and hops on a plane to find out who she is about to become. Once again, her imagination is acknowledged as it allows her to cyclically frame the narrative of the play: “But I saw something only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things.” (285) Her vision is related to our discussions of individualism and socialism. She sees “a web, a great net of souls...of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired.” (285) Corby notes that “when systems of defence seem least able to cope, there remains a resilience that develops out of our relationships with others.”⁵⁰ Harper recognizes this in a prophetic vision of a community that will protect and repair our failed immunity systems, it is a utopian portrait of how the world could renew itself. “Web” suggests an interconnectedness between all the members of society which corresponds to Levinasian vision and his ethics of the Other. In other words, it is an emphasis on community and socialism rather than on individuals and capitalism.

2.4 Belize and Roy

A direct comparison between the two attitudes can be observed in the characters of Belize and Roy. The two characters differ from the others – their portraits are more abstract in the sense that they as personalities directly follow the ethics they represent with no exceptions and their interactions are meditations on the clash of the individualist and socialist stances in society. This was a deliberate choice on the author’s part, as professed in an interview with Bruce McLeod:

I wanted [Belize] to be the ideological counterweight to Roy, that there were two people in the play who were not lost and inert and swimming around deeply confused. I wanted there to be two people, one of the Left and one of the Right, who had a very clear moral

⁴⁹ Kruger, “Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*,” 156.

⁵⁰ Corby, “The Audacity of Hope,” 27.

compass and knew exactly where they were in the universe at all times, and who were not in theoretical, ethical crises.⁵¹

Even though the two are united by their sexual orientation (and therefore by the affinity with death and suffering in the age of AIDS) and by their status as racial outsiders in the primarily white and protestant America, the two differ on the grounds of their different political orientations. While Belize is recognized by others as a “Christian martyr” (65) who takes care of the others without expecting something in return and propagates the Levinasian ideals of selfless love and nurture, Roy Cohn is shown to be a selfish and cruel man who is unable to find forgiveness and love for others. The former is defined by his connections with community while the latter is defined by emphasis on individualism and power. In some ways, the figure of Roy Cohn represents the myth of American Dream and self-reliance – he is rich, powerful and does not need anyone – and the figure of Belize function as “[Roy’s] negation” (223), as the puts it. Roy’s privilege grants him the ability to choose his own self-definition, one he refuses to reconsider even when the reality of his illness confronts him, as is apparent in the last scene of “Bad News.” He perpetually denies the stances represented by Belize and is not redeemed until his death. Bigsby writes of Cohn: “He trades connectiveness for power, a power which isolates him, cuts the thread that potentially links him with others, and connection is not merely the structural principle of *Millennium Approaches* but equally its theme.”⁵² Roy describes his politics in a conversation with Joe, in interpersonal terms: “Love; that’s a trap. Responsibility; that’s a trap, too...Don’t be afraid; people are so afraid; don’t be afraid to live in the raw wind, naked, alone.” (61) Denying the responsibility for the Other and not recognizing the ties to others is Roy’s biggest crime and Belize and the other members of gay community detest him for it. Omer-Sherman problematizes Roy Cohn’s ambiguous position in the arc of the play: “Only the morbidly cynical Roy Cohn remains unredeemable; trapped in a stasis of

⁵¹ Bruce McLeod, “The Oddest Phenomena in Modern History,” in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 80.

⁵² Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 109.

selfishness, he succumbs to mortality by the end of the play.”⁵³ Omer-Sherman is right about Roy Cohn being overwhelmed by and punished for his remorseless individualism by the act of death. It is important to add that the selfish positions he represents are absorbed by the act of solidarity provided by Belize and Louis who connect during the recital of the Jewish prayer Kaddish. The scene shows that through forgiveness for those who stand in opposition to the anti-individualist theses we can strengthen our communities. From this perspective, the created connections represent the true historical progress which stands for hope and unity. These values are what Belize represents on stage. Omer-Sherman describes the nurse as “one of the most humane voices of the drama.”⁵⁴ He mediates between the Left and Right, between the ill and the healthy, between Louis and Prior. He aids those who need him and does not fall into the different moral conundrums the characters face. Belize recognizes the ethical principles in love and relationships which is clear in his conversation with Louis, a character that struggles with finding his way between the two ideological stances: “Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love.” (104) Additionally, in the same scene, the contract between the two conversing characters is indicated by how they perceive the world, which is signified by their different perceptions of smells in the air. Belize operates in a reality the other characters like Louis and Roy do not have access to, a reality in which he can inhale the “softness, compliance, forgiveness, grace,” (105) values of those recognizing and sacrificing for the Other.

When the two meet in the hospital, Roy is in need and Belize has power over him. He could refuse to communicate with Roy or not be there for him, but because of his strong moral compass and adherence to the ethical principles recognized by Levinas, Belize decides to support Roy through his illness (the by-product of this is that he gets some ATZ pills for Prior, but it is not his primary motivation). For example, when Roy tells him: “Whatta I gotta do? Beg? I don’t want to be alone.,” Belize stays and talks with him. The notion of community is reinforced by the two uniting

⁵³ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 16.

⁵⁴ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 8.

on the grounds of their shared sexual orientation. Belize tells Roy to be wary of the radiation and when doubting his motivations (“You’re just a fucking nurse. Why should I listen to you over my very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor?” (154)), Belize answers: “He’s not queer. I am.” (154) Belize understands the importance of feeling connected to others and therefore is able to offer Roy the support he needs. The latter fails to understand this when he says: “I think... You have little reason to want to help me.” (155) Because of his individualistic attitudes and absolute lack of the concept of selflessness, he does not manage to see where that support comes from. Once again, Belize reiterates his point about the gay community they are both part of: “Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another.” (155) In many ways, in the course of their shared scenes, Belize tries to focus on their connection despite the constant racial slurs and attacks from Roy’s side, he persistently reaches out and climbs the walls that Roy builds with his individualistic attitudes. When Belize says “Join the club.” (215), Roy only answers: “I don’t belong to any club you could get through the front door of.” (215) His self-denial grants Roy his status and power, but it also robs him of any connections he might have built with the community, as argued by Bigsby. It could be argued that the feeling of family Belize offers can only be established through his connection with Joe, a man in a similar situation who shares similar political orientations. This mechanism is individualistic and isolationist in the sense that Roy refuses to socialize with people who are different and who are outside of his social class. He refuses to recognize the Other when he tells Belize: “You. Me. No. Connection.” (216) He does not only refer to the nurse, but also to everyone in the world. The “Me” feels disconnected from the general “You” which directly contradicts the Levinasian radical ethics and opposes the socialist theses proposed by Kushner’s theory and practice. Most argues about Cohn: “Certainly his anti-communist, right-wing politics make him an unsympathetic figure. But what really damns him is hypocrisy, and specifically the personal hypocrisy of living life in the closet.”⁵⁵ I agree with what Most is saying here – the individualistic

⁵⁵ Most, *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America*, 235.

attitudes are harmful in society and their persistence in Roy's psyche portray him as a cruel and paralysed figure who promotes the capitalist interests; however, his fatal flaw is rooted in his inability to connect with people who are undergoing extreme suffering and pain. His refusal of the Other is particularly harmful in the context of the AIDS crisis where disconnecting from the other victims promoted marginalization and stigma around the illness. Despite being invited by Belize to recognize his mistakes and redeem himself, he remains stuck in the same anti-individualist thought patterns, both towards the living and the dead, which are represented by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, which will be explored more in depth in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 – Angels and Demons: Metaphysical Interactions with the Spirit World

3.1 Fantasia, The Realm of Dreams and Self-Distanced Perspective

According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *fantasia* represents the Italian musical genre often written “in a style in which form is subservient to fancy.”⁵⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary* also describes it as “a piece of music with no fixed form, or one consisting of tunes that many people know or recognize.”⁵⁷ This corresponds to my discussion in Chapter 2 of the play’s focus on connection and the universality of the human experience as represented by various members of marginalised groups: each plays their own alienated tune, but when they listen to each other, they are able to form meaningful communities that foster the ideas of love, care and responsibility whilst rejecting the notion of individualism. Its Latin predecessor *phantasia* means “fantasy”⁵⁸ or “an imagined situation”⁵⁹ and in this sense has a powerful metaphysical presence in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* in the different manifestations of what Harold Bloom alludes to as “spirit world.”⁶⁰ According to Kushner, these include for example “the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies, the ghosts, Prior’s fiery Book hallucination and the Angel’s arrival”⁶¹ but we could also include Prior’s visit to Heaven and the mutual dream scenes. Marianne Elliott, the director that worked on the 2017 National Theatre production, acknowledges the contrast between the realism of the first part and the fantasy of the second part: “I was very drawn to its magic realism, [...] the supernatural, the subconscious, the bravery of it. So it starts off in a quite domestic

⁵⁶“fantasia, n.” Oxford English Dictionary Online, last modified June 2021, last accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68099?redirectedFrom=fantasia>.

⁵⁷ “fantasia, n.” Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Thesaurus Online, last modified June 2021, last accessed June 9, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fantasia>.

⁵⁸ “fantasy, n.” Oxford English Dictionary Online, last modified June 2021, last accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68119>.

⁵⁹ P. G. W. Glare, “phantasia, n.” *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1372.

⁶⁰ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Tony Kushner*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 3.

⁶¹ Kushner, “A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging,” 313.

realistic settings and then grows and grows and grows beyond and beyond and beyond that.”⁶² What is important about these magical events is the distance they repeatedly provide for the characters who in those metaphysical spaces let themselves breathe, heal, reflect, change, and realize things that would in their physical existence remain inaccessible, as well as for the audience, who get access to the externalized internal worlds of the characters, resulting in deeper understanding of the plot and giving way to multitudes of social and historical perspectives. In other words, these spectral events provide a mirror for what is happening in the physical realm of the stage and allow space for the audience to contemplate more closely the devastating events of the 1990s America. Thanks to the magical interludes, the spectators can observe the play’s domestic realism from distance and thus become more able to recontextualize the events in their immediate historical circumstances. As Kushner notes, these moments should be both fantastical immersions and reminders of the real world that make us reflect on it from a distanced perspective: “...[The moments of magic] ought to be fully imagined and realized, as wonderful theatrical illusions – which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly thrilling, fantastical, amazing.”⁶³ This effect is reinforced by the variety of Brechtian devices that will be discussed in the next chapter.

My focus in this work is not psychological, but I believe that it can be useful to mention several research articles regarding the distancing effect to explain the conceptualization of the hallucinations and dreams as the Other and to describe its interaction with the characters. Using the moments of magic to enhance the distance from one’s immediate distressing circumstances and in consequence providing the space for cognitive processing of such events mirrors the findings related to the beneficial effects of distancing in therapy, such as more abstract holistic reflections on

⁶² Marianne Eliot, from a video introduction to *Angels in America* presented by Edith Bowman. *Introduction to National Theatre Live: Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (2017), 3:52, <https://www.ntathome.com/products/angels-in-america-part-one-millennium-approaches>.

⁶³ Kushner, “A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging,” 313.

the situations.⁶⁴ Barbosa et al. explored the significance of flexibility between immersion and distancing, concluding that

higher frequency of transitions between the two perspectives in the intermediate phase of therapy was associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, indicating that it may be important for a client to learn to shift frequently from one perspective to the other, alternating between a view of the negative experience through a first-person perspective to more reflective one through a third-person perspective as many times as possible.⁶⁵

In *Angels*, the distance is realized precisely by the different dreams and hallucinations, the moments of magic. Both the characters and the audience benefit from the space the “spirit world” provides, allowing them to engage with and interpret the situations and moral positions from a more objective viewpoint. Moreover, the shifts between the realistic (immersive) and non-realistic (self-distanced) portrayals on stage correspond to the therapeutical practice observations of Barbosa et al. as they enhance the reflection that is required for the dialectical theatre in which creating connections and challenging the naturalistic portrayals of reality is encouraged. To put it differently, the interaction with the Other non-realistic world helps the characters with orientation in the realistic lives they lead on stage. Both dreams and hallucinations constitute the space for reflection and transform the experiences of the characters into more easily feasible images that produce connections that would otherwise remain uncovered. Their likeness is apparent from the juxtaposition of the two in the description of the mutual dream scene in Act 1 of *Millennium Approaches*:

Prior is dreaming that he’s at a fantastic makeup table, applying his face. Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination...For some reason, Harper has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior’s dream. It is bewildering. (30)

The parallel between the two characters is implicit in the similar positions in their marriages in the initial scenes of *Millennium Approaches*, but in this scene it is made explicit. Although they are isolated in their immediate realities, in the hallucination they connect, help each other uncover

⁶⁴ Ethan Kross and Igor Grossman, “Boosting Wisdom: Distance From the Self Enhances Wise Reasoning, Attitudes and Behavior,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141, no.1 (February, 2012): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024158>.

⁶⁵ Eunice Barbosa et al., “Flexibility between immersion and distancing: A dynamic pattern with effect on depressive symptoms,” *Psychotherapy Research* 31, no.4 (August, 2020): 502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2020.1807638>.

something about themselves and feel less lonely as a result. Interaction with the Other, realized by and through the realm of the spirit world, enables them to confront what is happening in a relatively objective manner. It could be argued that the characters are able to progress thanks to the distance from the real-world happenings, one that allows them to create connections they have not been able to make, both in themselves and with each other. In conclusion, the myriad of the magical moments (different visions and dream-like hallucinations) reflects the multitude of ways in which the characters interpret their realities and process the conditions they find themselves in, each in their own unique fashion, as will be illustrated later in this chapter. Fisher argues that “as in *Bright Room* and *Hydriotaphia*, Kushner pushes the borders of realistic theatre further by combining fundamentally realistic characters and situations with ghosts, historical displacements, and outright fantasy to alter the way the audiences experience the characters’ ordinary lives.”⁶⁶ The interactions with the “spirit world” will be analysed on personal and social level. On a personal level, the most prominent visions happen in Harper and Prior’s worlds, in both their own and shared universes, and in Roy Cohn’s illness-induced reality in the shape of Ethel Rosenberg. On a social level, the distancing effect is provided by the Angel and the visit of Heaven that poses antithetical demands to the Earth’s realities. The vision of Earth the Angel provides is a communal dream of the Heaven of what the world could look like. The interaction of Earth and Heaven is precisely the kind of interaction with the Other that allows Prior to create his own destiny.

3.2 The Personal – Harper, Prior and Ethel Rosenberg

As previously established, Harper and Prior are both primarily defined by the relationship with their (in many ways absent) partners. From this we can infer certain parallels about their destiny as the Others and about the nature of their hallucinations. Both are abandoned, physically and mentally – Harper in her fear-induced Valium addiction as well as in a passionless marriage, and Prior in his struggles with the threat of Death and many physical symptoms of his illness. In

⁶⁶ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 58.

many ways, their visions provide an insight for the audience into their internal individualization and processes of loss of the love of their partners. They both undergo their own individual paths but meet in mutual dream scenes and meditate on the nature of change and progress, reflecting and learning from what the other had found in their journey – again redefining the cultivated American atomism. We also established that the main heroine is endowed with greater observational skills and imagination than the other characters in the play. Fisher writes:

The highly imaginative Harper is prone to fantasies as an escape from her loneliness and unhappiness. Harper's inability to distinguish reality is seen by Kushner as an appealing quality – she, like the drag-loving Prior, has a rich imaginative life. Harper has already begun to imagine journeys away from her problems, and her troubled relationship with Joe, when she is visited by Mr. Lies, an imaginary travel agent, who looks like the African-American travel agent she became innocently attracted to while planning their move to New York. Fantasizing about this man as an escape from her profound sadness, Harper searches for a place without emotional pain and loneliness.⁶⁷

When Mr. Lies first appears in Act 1 of *Millennium Approaches*, he reminds her that she “wanted to travel” (17) and that he “suggests a vacation.” (18) She answers “Soon. Maybe soon.” (17) The appearance of Mr. Lies foreshadows the path Harper knows she needs to pick for herself, the one she stands up for at the end of the play when leaving for San Francisco, the metaphorical Heaven on Earth. Mr. Lies is a manifestation of her subconscious desires and in her vision reminds her of what she really needs, distancing her from the emotional turmoil she goes through whilst waiting for Joe. When the distress gets unbearable, she calls for the distance, seeks it out, as for example in the split scene of *In Vitro*: “Mr. Lies, I want to get away from here. Far away. Right now. Before he starts talking again.” (82) She does manage to get away into her hallucinated Antarctica, the “cold shelter for the shattered” (106) where “tears freeze,” (106) pure and delicate, disconnected from the sorrows – Mr. Lies reminds her of this fact when he says: “You can be numb and safe here, that’s what you came here for.” (107) Paradoxically, despite the fact that his name suggests otherwise, he, a fragment of illusion, tells the truth. This is emblematic of the interaction between the realistic and the non-realistic scenes, the Real world and the Other. Their relationship in *Angels* is dichotomic

⁶⁷ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 63-4.

because the visions reveal something true about the characters and theatrically move the play forward in its plot. For example, Harper allows herself to voice her appropriate relationship needs (ones she ignores in her reality with Joe) in these ahistorical construed places: “I can have anything I want here – maybe even companionship, someone who has...desire for me.” (106) The need for companionship she voices in her hallucinations shows us the inner parts of herself she was forced to suppress in her reality.

However, it is important to note that she acknowledges the boundaries of these constructions. Mr. Lies reminds her that “ice has a way of melting.” (106) She knows that her love for Joe precedes these metaphysical experiences when she tells him: “And I love you terribly. Terribly. That’s what’s so awfully, irreducibly real. I can make up anything but I can’t dream that away.” (52) She tells the Mormon mother: “I am stuck. My heart’s an anchor.” (199) She also knows about the limits of imagination which is described in more detail in the mutual dream scene: “Imagination can’t create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions.” (33) By their nature, these dreams exist in contrast to the real world which presupposes certain limitations because it is, in Harper’s words: “Finite. Terribly, terribly...” (33) Harper cannot move to the unreal because she is bound by her physical existence and her love for Joe in the real, on Earth. This is most apparent in Act 1 of *Perestroika* when the Antarctic hallucination changes into a “grim and grimy” (143) place. Freezing and hungry Harper desperately comments on the bodily experience of her illusion: “There’s your breasts, and your genitals, and they’re amazingly stupid, like babies or faithful dogs, they don’t get it, they just want him. Want him.” (144) In some ways, her body has not caught up with her meditations about what she needs. As Kruger puts it, “Harper’s fantasy life recapitulates but also enables a certain escape from the unsatisfactory heterosexual relation.”⁶⁸ Whilst the distance helps her with overcoming her immediate realities and reflecting on them, it is not healthy for her because it reiterates the paralysis

⁶⁸ Kruger, “Identity and Conversion,” 152.

she feels and makes her more miserable. Not only are the hallucinations fragmented and fragile and therefore do not actually provide the long-term stability that Harper lacks in the relationship with Joe, they are also harmful in the physical sense. The hallucinations are partially induced by the Valium pills she is addicted to, and in consequence her body and mind suffer.

Through her visions, she realizes that what she needs is an actual change in the real world. The pivotal moment in her journey takes her to the Mormon Mother whom she asks for advice. The Mother tells her to drop the anchor and describes the pain that comes with change. Harper accepts it by proclaiming “That’s how people change,” (200) which marks the beginning of her physical journey to San Francisco and her metaphorical journey to freedom. As we discussed, she is set free and lets herself leave Joe when he tells her that he sees nothing. When she has at the end of the play left the harmful situation and healed from the emotional damage that caused her to escape into these constructions, she is able to process things on Earth on her own, without the debilitating addiction to Valium, the need for distance or Mr. Lies offering his objective and realistic commentary. By then, she has internalized his affirmations and reflections and does not need to project these subconscious thoughts into sensory visions, externalize them into space. Instead, she meets Prior before his journey to Heaven and shares her aliveness, her sense of freedom: “I feel like shit but I’ve never felt more alive. I’ve finally found the secret of all that Mormon energy. Devastation. That’s what makes people migrate, build things...The string was cut, and off they went. Ravaged, heartbroken, and free.” (263)

Andrew Garfield who played Prior Walter in the 2017 National Theatre production said in an interview that Prior and Harper are like angels on stage for each other⁶⁹ – their journeys cross and recross, they mirror each other’s progress and meet in hallucinations to reduce their loneliness. Together, they face both hopeful and painful challenges. Prior’s first hallucination is their mutual dream scene which both asserts the reality of his illness and the hope that there is a part of him, “the

⁶⁹ Andrew Garfield, “Andrew Garfield and Denise Gough on *Angels in America*,” interview by Kate Bassett, *National Theatre Talks*, July 3, 2017, podcast audio, 6:40, <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/andrew-garfield-and-denise-gough-on-angels-in-america/>.

most inner part, entirely free of disease.” (34) This vision foreshadows that he too will be set free, which ultimately happens when he gets to reject the prophecy and returns to Earth to live more life. The vision endows him with hope, one of the most important forces in *Angels*. His individual hallucinations take on a different character compared to those of Harper – he does not seek spiritual guidance too much because that is already provided by Belize on Earth (who is played by the same actor as Mr. Lies, not by coincidence). Rather, in these constructed spaces he tries to understand and overcome his disease, understand his place in the world and in history and to console the loneliness he feels, to compensate for being abandoned by Louis. Prior’s first vision first happens in Act 3 of *Millennium Approaches*, after Louis decides to leave him. The name of the act is significant because while it portrays Prior as frightened and lost, it again reflects the hope that fuels him in his journey, one that perhaps comes from the most inner part of his body. As Chambers-Letson observed, *Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning* is a reference to Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*. He comments on its nature:

This hope is not the empty promise articulated by politicians, nor is it the escapist fantasy sold for consumption in the romantic comedies and melodramas of the culture industries. Rather, it is a hope critically rooted in the knowledge that the world in which we live is insufficient and that something better must and can be obtained.⁷⁰

Prior’s “fierce and gloomy” (89) vision features his ancestors which have both lived in times in which they were forced to face death. Prior I comments on Prior’s loneliness: “Like you, alone.” (90) Prior denies this which is paradoxical because these fantasies occur precisely because he is abandoned and alone (and of course to prepare him for the arrival of the Angel). They embody an intersection of the personal and the social, of Heaven and Earth, of past and present. The next vision he encounters occurs at a moment when the nurse Emily enquires about his personal life: “Are you seeing anyone? Loneliness is a danger. A therapist?” (103) Prior avoids the question and immediately after that is confronted with the magical vision of the flaming book. It could be argued that this dramatic fantasy gives way for an escape from the thoughts connected with the dangers of

⁷⁰ Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, “The Principle of Hope: Reflections on a Revival of *Angels in America*,” *TDR* 56, no.1 (Spring, 2012), 144. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41407134>.

loneliness – it is easier to be shocked and threatened by something fantastic than to confront the hard daily truths is one possible interpretation of what Kushner depicts. In Scene 6, the ghosts of Priors realize that “he wants someone familiar, a partner who knows his steps,” (119) and then Louis appears, asking Prior to dance. This vision heals Prior as his leg stops hurting, and he is momentarily allowed to escape from the physical pain, from the reality and even from the other two Priors who represent the unknown, the historical, the Death. However, just like Harper’s illusions, even though the distance helps him momentarily to reduce his anxiety, it is also detrimental to his well-being. After Louis disappears, the pain in his leg returns and his fear is heightened significantly when he hears the Angel’s wings. On the one hand, he is comforted by Louis’s presence and welcomes the physical closeness, but on the other hand, for example when he sees Louis in the Mormon Centre, it has the opposite effect – it saddens him, makes him cry and hurts him. It is implied that the threshold of revelation is dangerous for him. An ambiguity in Prior and Louis’s relationship reveals the latter’s path of loss and change, one that also becomes apparent to Harper in her relationship continually throughout *Perestroika*. Eventually, after ascending to and descending from Heaven, being forced to make a decision about his own (and humanity’s) destiny, he accepts the reality as it is and decides to live contrary to its imperfections and misery, despite his illness and loneliness. When he meets Harper in Heaven, he tells her: “To face loss. With grace. Is key, I think, but it’s impossible. All you ever do is lose and lose.” (263) Even when he thinks he cannot do it, he proves to himself that he can through saying goodbye to the little Sheba, who is a metaphor for his life with Louis and the alternate future they could have had. While at the beginning after the funeral he cried “Come back, little Sheba, come back,” (21) in *Perestroika* he is able to let her go, able to face the past and loss that comes with it, loss of his life with Louis. It is also interesting to observe that Sheba left him, like his partner. Presumably it also marks a moment of forgiveness which is where “love and justice finally meet,” (266) according to Belize. “Good-bye,

little Sheba. Good-bye,” (263) he says, saying farewell to his old life as an abandoned powerless human, welcoming “More Life.” (290)

The figure of Ethel Rosenberg is historically defined as the Other by the fact that during her lifetime, she was suspected of and later tried for spying for Russia during the Cold War and hailing the communist ideas with her husband Julius. The spectre is also realized as a wholly human character and therefore we could see her as an intersection of the interpersonal and metaphysical interaction of the real world and the dream realm. As pointed out by Claudia Barnett, she is “a ghost of her own agency”⁷¹ as even her actions have tangible consequences when she realizes herself in the real world, for example when she calls an ambulance for Roy when she appears during his health crisis. Why does she decide to confront Roy at the moment of his dying and what does their interaction show? Her ghost embodies the fear of the unknown he feels when confronted with his own mortality and future lack of “more life.” Additionally, the ghost might be associated with Roy’s suppressed guilt caused by the contribution to her death and presumably other injustices. While this connection might not be immediately apparent from Roy’s behaviours towards Ethel, I would argue that his dominance towards her is just part of the denial that conceals his shame and fear. Additionally, Barnett points out the association he makes when Joe comes to visit him to ask for forgiveness: “More importantly, the juxtaposition of ‘forgiveness’ with his description of her implies a connection in Roy’s mind – perhaps that he desires forgiveness from Ethel, which would support the guilt theory and explain him hallucinating her.”⁷² Before dying and being endowed with the blessing later provided by Belize and Louis, he is given an opportunity to process this guilt and interact with the past mistakes. This is realized through the metaphysical interaction with Ethel in which the distance from the physical symptoms and reminders of death is provided. He however denies this opportunity for forgiveness, which Belize describes as a place “where love and justice finally meet.” (266) In other words, he denies redemption, sealing his status as eternally

⁷¹ Claudia Barnett, “‘More Life’: Ethel Rosenberg’s Ghost And *Angels in America*,” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 43, no. 2 (2014): 135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2014.863102>.

⁷² Barnett, “Ethel Rosenberg’s Ghost,” 138.

individualistic and unjust. Instead, the characters he directly and indirectly wronged unite in a connection of the real world and the “spirit world” in a metaphysical blessing, choosing the love and justice, creating a better society than the one represented by Roy Cohn. To conclude this section, it is important to add that the metaphysical interaction that happens on a personal level is closely related to the interpersonal one because the spiritual world is often realized by human-like beings, such as in the case of Ethel Rosenberg or Mr. Lies, and gives way for different interpersonal interactions that would not happen in the real world, such as in the case of Prior and Harper.

3.3 The Social – Heaven, the Angel and Her Epistle

Even though the interactions with the “spirit world” on both personal and social level provide the distance that is necessary for reflection on individual and communal problems and situations, they do it in different ways. The realistic social circumstances are embodied by the physical Earth and the non-realistic visions are embodied by the spectral Heaven. The two worlds are in a reciprocal relationship in the sense that they influence each other and move each other forward. The relationship of the Earth and Heaven is one of the Self and the Other. Prior becomes a representative of the whole society in his interaction with Heaven – he is a mere delegate of the social Self, just as the Angel is a representative of the Other. Kushner writes in “Nine Notes Regarding the Angel”: “The Angel is related to humans but isn’t human.”⁷³ The Angel recognizes the spectral Otherness when she addresses Prior and Belize and confronts them about how they view Heaven: “As though WE are only / The dream of YOU.” (169) In this sense, Heaven could be considered as a collective hallucination of the social self, an externalization of the social troubles and inequalities. Savran writes: “Heaven is a kind of museum, not the insignia of the Now, but of before, of an antique past, of the obsolete...More nightmare than utopia, marooned in history, Heaven commemorates disaster, despair, and stasis.”⁷⁴ Prior and Angel share some parallels, such

⁷³ Kushner, *A Few Notes from the Playwright About Staging*, 316.

⁷⁴ David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” *Theatre Journal* 47, no.2 (May 1995): 213. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3208484>.

as being abandoned by the Creator and the man they love. Both are ill, which may be the reason why Prior is chosen as the prophet, representing the social consciousness. However, they differ in their primary ideologies and directions. The Angel argues against the “virus of Time” (169) that began when humanity was created and urges Prior (and therefore the whole of humanity) to stop moving, to stop migrating and mingling, “a deeply conservative political project,”⁷⁵ as called by Kruger. The Angel urges Prior: “Turn Back.” (172) This image relates to mysticism of Walter Benjamin and his description of the Angel of History, inspired by the painting of Angelus Novus:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁷⁶

The Angel asks Prior to turn toward the past and see the world similarly, to stop the Progress that destroys Heaven and drove the God away. Prior as the prophet for the humanity can reflect on the Earth’s progress through this encounter with the afterlife, described by Fisher as “fraught with the same struggles, confusions and pain encountered in real life.”⁷⁷ This is meaningful because the characters in the real world (including Prior) are figuring out how to live with change and how to move on from their paralysing situations, situations similar to being abandoned by God and feeling isolated and alone. Being confronted with the Heaven’s damage and the Angel’s illness caused by the inability to accept the change and adapt to one’s circumstances is eye-opening to Prior and provides him with the necessary perspective he needs to transform and create his future. He is allowed to make a choice about how to treat the Prophecy and about his own mortality. Not moving forward would mean dying which can be inferred from the inscription on the Book described by the Angel as: “On you in you in your blood we write have written: STASIS! The END.” (174) The

⁷⁵ Kruger, “Identity and Conversion,” 152.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-8.

⁷⁷ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 7.

word “stasis” is immediately followed by “the end,” which encapsulates the nature of the prophecy and Prior’s choice. By being confronted with the Other, he realizes that stasis is the end, and that in order to move forward, one must live and accept the past for what it is, learn from it and create a historical progress. Christopher Bigsby notes about the play that “[t]hough pain recurs, the burden of history is never the same because those who choose to shoulder it have themselves been transformed by the experience.”⁷⁸ In this case, the experience that transforms Prior is being visited by the Angel and visiting Heaven. In this journey, he is not alone, as noted by Bigsby: “The disassembled, the fragmented, the damaged, the marginal have to be drawn together.”⁷⁹ This again stresses the focus on community and interaction with others and other perceptions of the world. If Prior was not visited by the Angel, he would never realize the true state of his affairs on Earth. Similarly, if he did not strive for connecting with his community and remained in isolation, he would never be able to find his path and figure out what he needs to face. Prior is first aided by Belize who helps decode him the true meaning of his metaphysical interaction with the Angel. At the same time, he also reminds him of the world’s constant activity and growth: “This is just you, Prior, afraid of...Of what’s coming. Afraid of time. But see that’s just not how it goes, the world doesn’t spin backwards.” (175) Belize is the earthly reminder that life must go on, the advocate of Progress, especially when he grounds Prior in the physical urban reality of New York: “Listen to the world, to how fast it goes...That’s New York traffic, baby, that’s the sound of energy, the sound of time. Even if you’re hurting, it can’t go back.” (176) Later, he is helped by Hannah who shows him that he does not have to conform to what Heaven is expecting of him and humanizes the Angel, makes it rejectable and less scary for Prior: “An angel is a belief. With wings and arms that can carry you. If it lets you down, reject it...Seek something new.” (242)

The connection with community reminds Prior of his life on Earth which is what he eventually picks as he tells the Angels: “We can’t just stop. We’re not rocks. Progress, migration,

⁷⁸ Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights*, 119.

⁷⁹ Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights*, 118.

motion is...modernity. It's animate, it's what living things do. We desire." (275) Thanks to the visit to Heaven, he chooses life, which would be hard to do without the distance from his damaged physical state. He chooses to create history and future, to go forward. Savran notes: "Without desire (for change, utopia, the Other), there could be no history."⁸⁰ Thanks to the exposure to Heaven's state throughout Perestroika, Prior's relationship with Louis is also transformed as he becomes independent and empowered by accepting the loss of their romantic bond. He shares his experience with the Angels and advises them to do the same with their God who abandoned them and paralysed them in their situation, much like Louis did. Prior does not only offer his advice to the Angels, he also processes his own situation and asserts his persuasions regarding his romantic partner. In other words, the interaction with the metaphysical space of Heaven allows him to understand things about himself:

He isn't coming back. And even if He did...If He ever did come back, if He ever dared to show His face, or his Glyph or whatever in the Garden again. If after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see...how much suffering His abandonment had created, if all He has to offer is death...You should sue the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He. He oughta pay. (275-276)

We can see that the self-distanced perspective realized by the interaction with Angels shows Prior what he needs to do and moves him forward. He accepts his own advice when Louis comes back and visits him in the hospital, telling him he loves him. As Prior is now changed by the experience of interacting with Heaven, creating a new history for himself, he no longer performs the role of abandoned lover assumed by the Angel. Kushner describes her purpose as a "determination to get her lost love to return before everything falls apart."⁸¹ Instead, he chooses More Life. This is possible only thanks to his journey to a different reality that mirrors his own, and through the interaction with the Other that enables him to regain his sense of self and purpose.

⁸⁰ Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism," 23.

⁸¹ Kushner, *A Few Notes from the Playwright About Staging*, 320.

Chapter 4 – The Epic Theatre: Metatheatrical Interactions with the Audience

4.1 Bertolt Brecht

Angels in America reinforces critical approaches to the capitalist individualist stances through its portrayal of interpersonal and metaphysical interactions, not only by the content and the depiction of diverse themes, but also through the form and various theatrical devices which reinforce metatheatrical interaction with the Other, the audience. In this chapter, I will delineate the Brechtian background of these devices and their particular manifestations and effects. Moreover, I will talk about how actors and directors involved in different productions have related to and realized them. Kushner acknowledges his indebtedness to Bertolt Brecht – more specifically, the inspiration he found in Brecht’s politically involved “epic” dialectical theatre:

The *Short Organum* was a kind of revelation for me. It was the first time I believed that people who are seriously committed political intellectuals could have a home in the theater, the first time that I believed theater, really good theater, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis. The things that were exciting me about Marx, specifically dialectics, I discovered in Brecht, in a wonderful witty and provocative form. I became very, very excited about doing theater as a result of reading Brecht.⁸²

What kind of radical and committed theatre can be found in Brecht’s work? Brecht cultivated the social function of his theoretical and practical theatrical work as he according to Laura Bradley “created a dialectical theatre that would expose the contradictions in social reality and depict society as an ever-changing process, not a fixed state.”⁸³ He aimed to deconstruct the Aristotelean stagnant and unchangeable theatrical realities and the mere empathy and subsequent passivity they breed and replace it with active critical participation in one’s own reality. As put by Bradley, instead of “encourag[ing] spectators to resign themselves to the status quo by presenting workers as powerless victims of their heredity and environment,”⁸⁴ the non-Aristotelean theatre developed by Brecht

⁸² Carl Weber, “I Always Go Back to Brecht,” in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 106.

⁸³ Laura Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 4.

⁸⁴ Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre*, 4.

points out that the world can be changed and one's circumstances do not necessarily define their destiny. This is similar to the journeys the characters in *Angels* go through, escaping their paralyses and eventually creating their own realities. They prove that they can become unstuck and freed from the positions assumed for them by the 1990s American political climate.

The Brechtian theatre shows that the world constantly progresses and is not ever in the stable state suggested by the naturalistic theatre, which can be a powerful realization for both actors and audience. David Barnett argues that "if people change their circumstances (society), they will also change themselves. Change is brought about by the dialectical tensions between individual and society."⁸⁵ The circumstances are never truly settled and thus, we have always an opportunity to challenge the passivity required of us by the capitalist system. The main device of the dialectical theatre is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, translated either as estrangement or alienation effect. Brecht describes it as "a representation [...] which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar."⁸⁶ Elsewhere he says: "To alienate an event or character is simply to take what to the event or character is obvious, known, evident and produce surprise and curiosity out of it."⁸⁷ What Brecht is saying essentially is that the audience needs to step out of the empathetic paralysis which the classical theatre imposes and has to instead simultaneously be able to undergo the theatrical experience and at the same time reflect on it critically and actively in order to change something in the outside world. The unfamiliarity of the sensations achieved by alienation gives way for more objective and rational analyses and therefore for change. To put it differently, Brecht essentially encourages interaction of the theatre and audience. In Kushner's words, Brecht's methods are "a really brilliant marriage of Marxist theory as theatre practice."⁸⁸ The connection with Marxism is important in relation to the anti-individualist theses developed in *Angels*. As

⁸⁵ David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 21.

⁸⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and transl. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1964), 192.

⁸⁷ Bertolt Brecht and Carl Richard Mueller, "On the Experimental Theatre," *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no.1 (September, 1961): 14. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1125000>.

⁸⁸ Anna Deavere Smith, "Why Get Out of Bed?" in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 248.

Brecht writes in *Organum*: “[T]he smallest social unit is not the single person but two people. In life too we develop one another.”⁸⁹ Again, he reiterates the importance of both interpersonal and metatheatrical interaction and shows how they are connected – we can learn from the theatrical practice about our own world, and the function of the theatre should to an extent be didactic and should hail community as a value to be reproduced in society. Such conception of social relations acknowledges that the theatrical practice does not happen in isolation from the external world and is supposed to encourage the development and critical thinking of the audience. In conclusion, the epic theatre “arouses [spectator’s] capacity for action, forces him to take decisions, [spectator is] man as a process.”⁹⁰ The ideal Brechtian theatregoer actively engages with the material, questions it and compares it with what they know, remains active with what is happening. Overall, it is important to realize that the general effect is a result of a harmony between several elements, as argued by Reinelt:

The subjunctive mode is always an essential part of epic theater. First, the provisional positing of a different way of organizing social life—what if the world were not like this? Second, the conditional—if the spectators and the actors and the play form a Brechtian triangle of speculation and critique, aesthetic pleasure, and political engagement, then the “epic” happens.⁹¹

The Brechtian theatre unites the author, the form, the content and the auditorium. All need to share a similar mindset – one that is open to change, experimentation and coming up with solutions to personal and social issues. Because Brecht is arguably “his most important dramatic inspiration,”⁹² Kushner does share and encourage this mindset in various ways.

⁸⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 197.

⁹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

⁹¹ Janelle Reinelt, “Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theatre,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 237.

⁹² Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 4.

4.2 How Fantasia Is Created

In its essence, *Angels in America* is dialectical. With its contradictions, it refuses to be put in a box and constantly recharacterizes itself, deconstructs separate expectations and demands active critical participation from the audience. Some of these contradictions are summed up by Savran:

The opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true: *Angels* valorizes identity politics; it offers an antifoundationalist critique of identity politics. *Angels* mounts an attack against ideologies of individualism; it problematizes the idea of community. *Angels* submits liberalism to a trenchant examination; it finally opts for yet another version of American liberal pluralism.⁹³

Before describing the different ways Kushner adheres to the Brechtian mindset, I think it is important to mention that while the play is dialectical, it also incorporates other influences. In many ways, he develops a distinctly American epic theatre. Unlike *A Bright Room Called Day* which he calls “direct imitation [of Brecht],”⁹⁴ Kushner describes his writing process with *Angels* followingly: “The play took over and went off in a direction I had never foreseen.”⁹⁵ One influence that should be mentioned is Tennessee Williams whose *A Streetcar Named Desire* is invoked in Prior’s addressing of Hannah: “I always relied on the kindness of strangers.” (281) According to Fisher, the parallels between the two can be found “in the voluptuousness of language, the focus on sexuality, and the reevaluation of past and current moral certitudes.”⁹⁶ In addition to the direct influence of Williams and the consequent deepened lyricism and focus on the personal, an area in which Kushner further diverges from the traditional Brechtian distancing in *Angels* is in the way he uses magic. While Brecht argues that “The illusion created by the theatre must be a *partial* one, in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion,”⁹⁷ Kushner wants his moments of magic “to be *fully* imagined and realized, as wonderful theatrical illusions.”⁹⁸ On the other hand, he also recognizes the importance of alienation from these illusions when he says “...it’s okay if the wires

⁹³ Savran, “Masochism,” 243.

⁹⁴ Weber, “I Always Go Back to Brecht,” 112.

⁹⁵ Weber, “I Always Go Back to Brecht,” 112.

⁹⁶ Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner*, 8.

⁹⁷ Fisher, “Tony Kushner’s Metaphorical Jew,” 79.

⁹⁸ Kushner, “A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging,” 313.

show, and maybe it's good that they do."⁹⁹ Most notes that Kushner "insures in good Brechtian fashion that the audience never has the opportunity to be lost in illusion by constantly drawing attention to the play as a work of and about popular culture."¹⁰⁰ The blending of the two traditions in American context may be called "Americanization of Brecht,"¹⁰¹ as noted by Weber – it is important to say that while Kushner remains faithful to the theatrical political activism intrinsic to dialectical stage, he also incorporates the melodramatic, the fantastical, the deeply personal and the historical from the American theatrical tradition, as well as elements of Jewish mysticism. It could be argued that in this way Kushner interacts with the historical Other, the memory of the American stage. Kushner recognizes that his work does not exist in isolation which supports his anti-individualist theses and stances on community.

In "Notes about Staging," Kushner writes: "The engine of the play is the struggle in which the characters engage to change unendurable circumstances – all the characters, all the time we're watching them."¹⁰² Here Kushner alludes to the focus on activity promoted by Brecht – the seizing of opportunity for change, the determined involvement with one's circumstances. Omer-Sherman reiterates this: "The value most consistently affirmed in the play is openness to change and transformation and the generosity to Others that such adaptiveness affords."¹⁰³ This is not done through focusing on one single centre hero as in naturalist theatre, but on a myriad of characters that come from different social backgrounds and are oppressed in different ways. They struggle together, and they search for solutions together. They learn about themselves on stage both as characters and actors. The audience is guided to perceive this and do the same through the variety of different alienating techniques. Marie Reslová notes on the 2019 Czech production of *Angels*:

⁹⁹ Kushner, "A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging," 313.

¹⁰⁰ Most, *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America*, 232.

¹⁰¹ Weber, "I Always Go Back to Brecht," 113.

¹⁰² Kushner, "A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging," 314.

¹⁰³ Omer-Sherman, "Fate of the Other," 16.

“Everything gives an impression of temporariness and impersonal provisionality.”¹⁰⁴ The social changeability is additionally suggested by the role switching throughout the play which according to Ridout ensures that in epic theatre “no single actor is permanently associated with any particular character.”¹⁰⁵ In *Angels*, some of the double roles express similar constant moral positions or persuasions. For example, the actress who plays the Angel also takes on the role of the estate agent Sister Ella Chapter and the nurse Emily and they all have the same persuasion. For example, Ella pleads: “I always thought: People ought to stay put...Have a house! Stay put!” (85) Similarly, when Prior is in the hospital in Scene 8 of *Perestroika*’s Act 4, the nurse Emily says: “Keep breathing. Stop moving. STAY PUT.” (238) Seeing actors in different roles also reveals something important about the plot and strengthens the audience engagement and critical attitude. An example of this is the scene in which Louis visits the park and engages in the dangerous sexual encounter with a stranger. This man is played by the same actor who plays Prior, who meanwhile struggles with his physical condition in a hospital, abandoned by Louis. This juxtaposition of the two roles can be interpreted in several ways: on one hand, it reveals that Louis wishes to recreate acts of intimacy he shared with Prior who, being spectrally present, cares for him and keeps an eye on him; on the other hand, it reveals that Prior is angry and gets to slap him, suggesting the future tension between the two actors. We can see how the doubling is based on series of deliberate choices that aim to stimulate the audience and communicate with them on a metatheatrical level, revealing intricate details about the characters and plot.

The function of the role switching is accompanied by the usage of split scenes, “two separate events occur[ing] more or less simultaneously in different locations,”¹⁰⁶ as described by Kushner. These serve as reinforcers of the communal space on stage and further expose the Brechtian call for

¹⁰⁴ Marie Reslová, “Recenze: Pět hodin, ale vydrží bavit. V inscneaci Andělé v Americe se heroům daří,” *Aktuálně.cz*, published Feb 2, 2019; last accessed July 8, 2021. <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/divadlo/kushner-andele-v-americe-divadlo-abc-docekal-recenze/r~d6c40d04288b11e98854ac1f6b220ee8/>. My own translation.

¹⁰⁵ Ridout, *Theatre and Ethics*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ Kushner, “A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging,” 314.

active interpretation. The actors need to stay active throughout the entire scene so that the audience can react to and analyse all plotlines. These portrayals must not exist in isolation, as Kruger notes: "...the 'split scenes' suggest that discrete actions must, if we are to understand them fully, be read together."¹⁰⁷ The theatregoer is confronted with the externalizations of the universal human conflicts and is forced to draw connections between people of different background and experiences that would otherwise remain covered. For example, according to Reinelt, in the Wing-Davey production, the actors violated each other's physical space to "produce an effect of overflowing boundaries...staging the dissolution and blending of identities."¹⁰⁸ The interaction between the onlooker and the character in *Angels* can be used in other contexts for similar purposes of call for tolerance and education – for example, Blazar decided to focus on the split scenes while studying the play in classroom environment: "I found the relationship between student readers and theatrical characters also to be a split scene, where each came into a unique and compelling community with the other."¹⁰⁹ The effect of the split scenes is complemented by the minimalism of the stage design which provides focus on the actors. Kushner encourages the simple staging when he says: "The plays benefit from a pared-down style of presentation, with scenery kept to an evocative and informative minimum."¹¹⁰ For example, the scenography of Martin Chocholoušek in the 2019 Czech production of *Angels* directed by Michal Dočekal had been described as "creating a feeling of totally interconnected, fluid space,"¹¹¹ reinforcing the sense of community. The alienation effect is accentuated by the lightning, equipment on stage and sound effects. For example, Alice Clapie writes of the 2017 National Theatre production: "The use of neon lights, rain, and snow added to the symbolist side of the staging that aimed at symbolizing public spaces while realizing private

¹⁰⁷ Kruger, "Identity and Conversion," 154.

¹⁰⁸ Reinelt, "Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater," 239.

¹⁰⁹ David Blazar, "Self-Discovery through Character Connections: Opening up to Gayness in *Angels in America*," *The English Journal* 98, no.4 (March 2009): 80. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40503269>.

¹¹⁰ Kushner, "A Few Notes from the Playwright about Staging," 312.

¹¹¹ Reslová, "Recenze: Pět hodin, ale vydrží bavit. V inscneaci Andělé v Americe se hercům daří."

ones.”¹¹² The staging of the 1994 San Francisco American Conservatory Theatre production emphasized the effects of technology on stage, as it was “[m]ade up of industrial materials, large, almost oversized metal ramps and bridges, exposed light instruments, and aluminium rigging for the angel,”¹¹³ as described by Reinelt. The different applications of the Brechtian devices effectively reinforce the critical attitudes and encourage the interaction with the Other – that of the theatre with the audience and vice versa.

Some other Brechtian devices featured in the play would include the deliberate breaking of the fourth wall, the use of titles or the “theatre in a theatre” interaction between Prior, Angel and Belize. The most important soliloquy that is directed towards the audience is Prior’s final monologue. It is the final sermon that calls for community and bravery of action and that gives agency to the LGBT+ community. In the 2003 HBO production, Justin Kirk who plays Prior leaves the group and looks directly into the camera which allows for an eye contact between the spectator and the screen. (The technique alludes to the prelude of the series, the starting credits, which are concluded with the Bethesda Angel looking directly into the camera, silently addressing the audience.) He then leaves with the others and we can see only shadowed silhouettes that support each other as they ascend the stairs towards the light. This ending universalizes the journeys of the characters and as they disappear into the void of the darkened underpass, we may imagine ourselves walking with them, on our personal journeys of discovering better futures, of doing and continuing the Great Work. Similarly, the first scenes in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* are led by the actress who plays Hannah and her characters of the Rabbi and Aleksii Prelapsarianov. They both address the audience and set the tone for the two parts. As argued by Omer-Sherman, Rabbi’s eulogy for Louis’s grandma comprises of meditations on journeys that foreshadow those the characters and the audience will need to embark on, ones that are more closely materialized in

Perestroika:

¹¹² Alice Clapie, “Poetry, Politics and Popcorn: *Angels in America* at the National Theatre,” *Miranda* 15. Online since Nov 7, 2017. Open Edition Journals, <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/11084>.

¹¹³ Reinelt, “Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater,” 239.

Through the device of the second-person “you,” the rabbi implicates the alienated diaspora Jew as well as all others in the audience who might be estranged from the world of values represented by their origins, ethnic or otherwise...In indelible ways, Kushner’s entire epic, as it unfolds from this moment, affirms this imperative to remember and to honour the “journey,” for the drama’s Jewish and non-Jewish characters alike.¹¹⁴

The reflections on the Bolshevik theory more bluntly reveal the urgency of progress and change and communicate to the audience the necessity of participating in those forces, using the plural personal pronouns “us” and “we.” The Bolshevik is usually facing the audience who become the participants in the council. In the Czech 2019 production this effect was emphasized by the use of red drapes and lights in the entirety of the auditorium. The Rabbi, the Bolshevik and Prior try to share their thoughts and ideas with the audience, just as Kushner does with his use of titles, which are usually announced by a person on stage or a speaker. These frame the transitions from one act to another and interrupt the naturalistic flow of the production. Often they presuppose an attitude the spectator ought to adopt during the act – for example, the first act of *Millennium Approaches* is called “Bad News” and shifts our focus to the various declarations and reveals that happen during the act. The second act is called “In Vitro” and foreshadows the isolation and separations the characters have to endure. The titles offer metatheatrical commentary on what is happening on stage. This is similar to Belize’s commentary during Prior’s retelling of his encounter with the Angel. Belize becomes part of the audience during that scene and provides more grounded and humane perspectives on what seems to be an illusionary hallucination of Prior’s sick mind. It is a Brechtian device because with his critical voice, Belize challenges Prior’s tale that he and the audience are seeing for the first time and tries to challenge the theses articulated by the Angel as well as point out the suspiciously close parallels with Louis and Prior’s destiny with the one of Heaven, for example when he says: “Abandoned. I smell a motif...The man that got away? And I think the time has come to let him go.” (171) Belize helps search Prior for his way and his focus on the noise and movement foreshadows Prior’s final decision to reject the prophesy and return to Earth. In this scene, Belize

¹¹⁴ Omer-Sherman, “Fate of the Other,” 19.

constitutes the perfect Brechtian audience because he rejects the tale that Prior tells him, approaches it critically, searches for solutions and answers to the heartbreak in a forward-thinking manner and from an objective viewpoint. In their interaction, we can also see the Brechtian focus on actors learning from each other about their characters in the course of the production, reacting to each other on stage when Prior and Belize are forced to dialectically converse about the situation, just as the audience should interact with the play. Overall, the Brechtian devices employed in *Angels* to encourage interaction with the audience (and the subsequent alienation) to make them critically evaluate the social and political climate include the role-switching the minimalism of the stage, the use of technology, light and sound effects, the use of titles, breaking of the fourth wall in the monologues addressed to the audience and the use of split scenes. These encourage the active participation of the audience and ensure that they do not perceive the play (and the world) as an unchangeable place where one is paralysed by their circumstances and isolated from other people. On the contrary, by being forced to stay connected with the characters who remain similarly active, the audience realize that they are part of communities and leave the theatre changed. In the next section, I will discuss how the actors and directors involved in the different productions perceive the interaction with the audience and the various changes and effects this kind of audience participation breeds in the real world.

4.3 From the Inside

For many, the involvement with the play proves emotional and influential, precisely because of the effective breaking of the fourth wall discussed above that promotes active public social citizenship and inspires personal journeys of loss and forgiveness similar to those that the characters undergo. I want to dedicate this section to excerpts from different interviews with the author and the people involved in different productions and pay homage to how they relate to the interaction with the audience from the inside as actors who realize it, and to how they perceive the messages it sends to the audience. Additionally, I wish to A more comprehensive chronicle of these effects would be

for example *The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of Angels in America* by Isaac Butler and Dan Kois published in 2018 as it provides detailed accounts from directors, editors, friends, actors, filmmakers, critics and Tony Kushner. Although I have space to only include some snippets of the oral history connected with the play, it is vital to my thesis that I disconnect from my subjective analysis of the play, connect to the experiences of the decades-old community and demonstrate at least some of the effects of the metatheatrical interaction. In some cases, due to the lack of theatrical resources, the boundary between the audience and the stage becomes non-existent altogether which transforms the space into a united whole, into a community exploring the text together. For example, the 1991 Eureka Theatre Company San Francisco production did not have time for all the scenes of *Perestroika*, so the actors would come in and sum up what happens in the scene. The director David Esbjornson comments on this:

It became another layer to the communication between actors, page, and audience. It was like someone stopped, became your friend, and told you what happened next. And people connected in the audience, which yelled and laughed and shouted. Kathy said it felt like a basketball game.¹¹⁵

The simile could remind us of how Brecht envisioned the atmosphere in the audience, one which Iris Smith likens to a cabaret:

[H]e envisioned epic theatre as a distinctly political but not dogmatic enterprise – a cabaret for the mind. In fact, the image of the 1920s cabaret clings to epic theater: a smoke-filled room where spectators, sitting back or strolling around, comment freely on the action.¹¹⁶

What this means is that the audience are part of the performance and connect the play with the real world, actively transmitting the theses outside of the stage. The “Brechtian triangle” alluded to by Reinelt acknowledges the direct role of the audience in the production, and so do the actors. Stephen Spinella, Kushner’s chosen actor for *Prior*, comments on the experience: “[T]he audience and the performance were of such a piece, so completely involved with each other. The audience

¹¹⁵ Isaac Butler and Dan Kois, *The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of Angels in America*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). Electronic edition: 98. Act 2, Chapter I.

¹¹⁶ Iris Smith, “Brecht and the Mothers of Epic Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 43, no.4 (December 1991): 492. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207978>.

became as much a part of the performance as we were.”¹¹⁷ Nancy Franklin calls the play “epic” for the following reasons: “[It was] epic not just in its intent but in its effect on audiences – people were swept in, swept away, and changed by it, their armor cracked.”¹¹⁸ This effect keeps repeating itself, in different ways and in different contexts.

I find it meaningful that the interaction with the play helps both people on stage and in the audience (as well as students who engage with the play in classroom on analytical level) discover, come to terms with, help understand or give the courage to share their own sexual identity and that it effectively stirs up the discourse of gender and sexuality. Travis Foster, a professor of English at Villanova University, says: “The play really changed my understanding of coming out. What it means to come out is not to be in this sort of individual project of self-affirmation; it is to be in a really political project that is profoundly interconnected.”¹¹⁹ The conversation about sexuality unites, as argued by Hilton Als: “[W]e are all deeply connected, simply by being active spirits in the same cosmos, and by being closeted and non-closeted gay men.”¹²⁰ From a perspective of a young adolescent growing up in a small Czech town, I can testify that being introduced to *Angels* during my high school years was revolutionary and meaningful as it opened a discourse that I was not familiar with and got to identify with groups of people I did not have a chance to meet during my childhood.

What connects people who see it is also the politics of the play. Michael Billington writes that *Angels* is a fascinating period document that also manages to speak to us today.¹²¹ We can imagine

¹¹⁷“The Angels Decade: 22 Interviews,” *American Theatre* 20 (December 2003): 72. Quoted in Deborah R. Geis, “Not ‘Very Steven Spielberg’?: *Angels in America* on Film,” in *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, ed. by William W. Demastes and Iris Smith Fisher (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 245.

¹¹⁸ Nancy Franklin, “America, Lost and Found,” *The New Yorker*, published Dec 8, 2003; last accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/08/america-lost-and-found>.

¹¹⁹ Butler and Kois, *The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of Angels in America*, 362.

¹²⁰ Hilton Als, “*Angels in America*: Brilliant, Maddening, and Necessary,” *The New Yorker*, published April 9, 2018; last accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/angels-in-america-brilliant-maddening-and-necessary>.

¹²¹ Michael Billington, “*Angels in America* review - Garfield and Lane excel in Kushner’s surreal epic,” *The Guardian*, published May 5, 2017; last accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/05/angels-in-america-review-andrew-garfield-nathan-lane-tony-kushner>.

that the American audience of the nineties was united by the activist need to raise awareness of the plague and people dying, it was a play for those who wanted to be heard. Lately, especially during the latest Broadway production, the play was especially relevant because Donald Trump, the protégé of Roy Cohn, was the president of the United States. Richard Lawson writes: “All of those parallels are there, and in that way the return of *Angels in America* feels perfectly timed, a clarion call from the past urging us out of fatalism and cataclysmic despair.”¹²² Under the contemporary US political climate, the play becomes even more relevant and offers a new perspective on the current issues that connects people in a similar way to how they did in the climate of the epidemic. Lawson adds about the experience: “I finally felt I could speak back to this beloved thing, that I understood some of its blinkered perspective, some of its messiness, its errant ambition.”¹²³ As the times change, the effects of the play change and the interaction with the audience must be adapted to the context in order to translate all of its ideas that relate to the sense of community, responsibility, and progress – as Abad-Santos writes: “...we all know, and Kushner does too, that progress is the only way forward.”¹²⁴

¹²² Richard Lawson, “Review: *Angels in America* Returns to Broadway in All Its Triumph and Tragedy,” *Vanity Fair*, published March 26, 2018; last accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/03/angels-in-america-revival-broadway-review>.

¹²³ Richard Lawson, “Review: *Angels in America* Returns to Broadway in All Its Triumph and Tragedy.”

¹²⁴ Alex Abad-Santos, “What it’s like to watch *Angels in America* in an age of making America great again,” *The Vox*, published March 30, 2018; last accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/30/17168846/angels-in-america-broadway-review>.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

In this work, I have focused on the interaction with the Other in *Angels in America* on three different levels – the interpersonal level, the metaphysical level and the metatheatrical level in the context of different philosophical and aesthetic frameworks, especially that of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. The three levels in different ways encourage the anti-individualist (or rather, socialist) theses such as the importance of building connections with other people and focus on creating communities. The human sociality and bonding is portrayed as the main force of generating progress and creating better future and more tolerant and free place for ourselves in the world. In the course of the play, both the audience and the characters walk the paths of personal discoveries, arriving at the Bethesda fountain in a redefined social unit. According to Freedman, Kushner offers “the image of redeemed community in the guise of a utopian Americanness where the nation is reconstituted as a postnuclear family made up of quarrelling outsiders.”¹²⁵ Through the characters’ ability to interact with the Other on the three different levels and their persistence to create a meaningful community, *Angels* shows that it is possible to change the world and actively engage with one’s surroundings.

It seems to me that the play remains relevant in the polarized political climates both in Europe and in the United States. For example, the importance of the most recent Broadway production had been underscored by the bleak picture of Donald Trump’s presidency and the segregationist attitudes towards immigrants and people of colour. It could be argued that the production of the play reminded the citizens of the need to evaluate one’s social and political realities and empowered members of marginalized communities to assert themselves in a climate similar to the 1990s. I believe that in the present it is also necessary to be reminded of the values of community and connection, especially when the measures against coronavirus force people into isolation and loneliness and arguably reinforce the myth of self-reliance. It is necessary to find ways of

¹²⁵ Freedman, *Klezmer America*, 57.

interacting with the Other and overcome the individualist discourse that strengthens the social inequalities and injustice. Through its anti-individualist theses, *Angels in America* shows us how to transcend the limitations established by people like Roy Cohn and create a better and freer future for ourselves. In Harper's words, we need to mend. In other words, we need develop a better social immune system through being more vulnerable with and accepting of others, creating healthy foundations for purposeful communities.

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Key words

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Society
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Interaction
Love
Theatre
Alienation
Change
Progress

Klíčová slova

Emmanuel Lévinas
Reagan
Zodpovědnost
Brechtovské divadlo
Druhý
Individualismus
Socialismus
Tony Kushner
Andělé
Společnost
Přízraky
Interakce
Láska
Divadlo
Alienace
Změna
Vývoj